

ALFRED

June, 1992 \$3.75 U.S./\$4.75 Can.

HITCHCOCK's

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

**SPECIAL
DOUBLE
ISSUE!**

**288
PAGES**

**MURDER AND
SUSPENSE
TALES
WITH EDGE!
WITH IMPACT!
WITH BITE!**

**18 STORIES
OF MYSTERY
AND
DETECTION**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

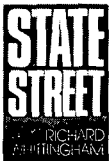




7468 \$18.00/\$9.98



5686 \$19.95/\$8.98



*5611 \$18.95/\$6.98



*4341 \$21.95/\$12.98

Try us for MURDER

Hot authors.
Slashed prices.
The evidence keeps mounting.
Try *Mystery Guild* for a host
of crime.

TAKE **6 BOOKS FOR 99¢**

WHEN YOU JOIN
Mystery Guild NOW!



5645 \$19.95/\$9.98



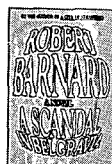
5578 \$17.00/\$9.98



1164 \$20.00/\$8.98



9241 \$20.00/\$11.98



5678 \$17.95/\$9.98



5603 \$18.95/\$8.98



1446 \$19.95/\$9.98



1016 \$18.95/\$8.98

HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN . . .

6 BOOKS FOR 99¢—PLUS A FREE CLUB TOTE. Send no money now. You'll be billed 99¢, plus shipping and handling, when your membership is accepted.

A GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION. If you're not 100% satisfied with your books, return them within 10 days at our expense. Membership will be canceled and you'll owe nothing. The Club Tote is your free gift to keep.

HUGE DISCOUNTS ON HARDCOVER BOOKS. Save as much as 60% off publishers' edition prices. Club books are sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.

THE FREE CLUB MAGAZINE. You'll receive up to 16 issues a year. Each issue reviews the Featured Book Selection(s) plus a wide variety of alternate books from the Club's extensive library.

SHOPPING MADE SIMPLE. To get the Featured Book Selection(s), do nothing—it will be sent automatically. If you prefer another book—or none at all—simply return your Member Reply Form by the specified date. A shipping and handling charge is added to each order.

AN EASY-TO-MEET OBLIGATION. Take up to 2 years to buy 4 more books at regular low Club prices. Afterwards, you may resign membership anytime.

RISK-FREE RETURN PRIVILEGES. If you get an unwanted book because your Club magazine was delayed and you had less than 10 days to respond, simply return the book at our expense.

Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.

Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.

x Hardcover edition exclusively for Club members

* Explicit scenes and/or language



FREE TOTE
with membership

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



MAIL TO:
Mystery Guild, 6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated—plus my FREE CLUB TOTE. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling.

SAVE MORE—TAKE ANOTHER BOOK FOR \$3.49

☐ Send me the book I've indicated and reduce my commitment to only 3 more books. Bill me an additional \$3.49, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

28299					78

Mr./Mrs. _____
Miss/Ms. _____

please print

Address _____ Apt. _____

28300

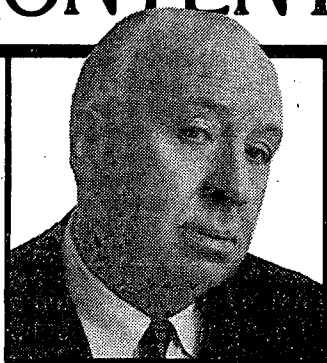
79

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

AHM 6/92

CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

SMALL TALK by Terry Courtney	6
NO HARM IN ALFIE by W. Sherwood Hartman	18
WORTHSAYER by Stanley Schmidt	26
A LESSON IN MURDER by Richard Hardwick	44
LITTLE MIRACLES by Kristine Kathryn Rusch	56
THE ROOTS OF DEATH by Margaret Maron	72
WHO IS JIM VOGELBAUGH? by D. J. Bart	83
THE CHARNWOOD FOREST MURDER by C. M. Chan	92
A VISITOR TO MOMBASA by James Holding	150
PITTER-PATTER by Ed Dumonte	162
ALECTRYON SLEPT by S. S. Rafferty	171
THE SLIP by Douglas D. Armstrong	196
A STRANGER COMES TO THE VILLAGE by Gregor Robinson	204
THE ETHICAL ASSASSINATION by Frank Sisk	214
LEO by Ron Abell	227
PRICKLY PAIRS by Neil Jillett	234
MR. BANJO by Charles Boeckman	246
DOUBLE IMAGE by Robert W. Alexander	259

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

UNSOLVED by Walter Shepherd

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED"

BOOKED & PRINTED by Carol Harper

MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller

THE STORY THAT WON

4

91

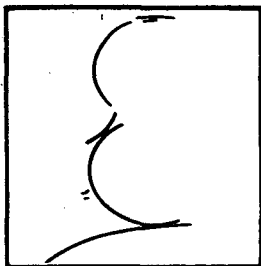
148

258

277

281

283



Cover by E. T. Steadman

Interior illustrations by Sallie Gregory

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 37, No. 6, June, 1992. Published every 28 days, which includes special issues in June and at year end, by Davis Publications, Inc., \$2.25 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.95 in Canada. Annual subscription \$31.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$37.50 elsewhere (in Canada, GST is included) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10168-0035. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1992 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3E1. Davis GST #R123293128. **ISSN: 0002-5224.**

"Double Image" by Robert W. Alexander, copyright © 1966 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., used by permission of the author; "Mr. Banjo" by Charles Boeckman, copyright © 1975 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., used by permission of the author; "Pitter-Patter" by Ed Dumonte, copyright © 1967 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., used by permission of the Larry Sternig Literary Agency; "A Lesson in Murder" by Richard Hardwick, copyright © 1963 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., used by permission of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency; "No Harm in Alfie" by W. Sherwood Hartman, copyright © 1969 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., used by permission of Alex Jackinson, Author's Representative; "A Visitor to Mombasa" by James Holding, copyright © 1974 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., used by permission of the author; "The Roots of Death" by Margaret Maron, copyright © 1969 by Margaret Maron, used by permission of the Vicky Bijur Literary Agency; "Alectryon Slept" by S. S. Rafferty, copyright © 1977 by S. S. Rafferty, used by permission of the author; "The Ethical Assassination" by Frank Sisk, copyright © 1963 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., used by permission of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency.

EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Summer is in sight, and we're back with our getting-to-be-traditional June Double Issue, filled with no fewer than eighteen stories for your pleasure. As before, some are favorites from AHMM's past.

This time, we could have put in a story from that past by Miel Tanburn, whom many of you will remember as an AHMM writer from 1966 ("Bright Alibi") to 1980. To our surprise, however, we discovered in the mail one day a new story by Mr. Tanburn (a pseudonym), now writing under his real name, Ron Abell. The author of "Leo" says, "I haven't written short stories for a decade or more, but recently felt the urge again. This story will

be the fourteenth one of mine to appear in your magazine, and the first under my own name, and it feels like a homecoming. I think I'll try some more." We're looking forward to that.

Three other writers for this issue are here with their first full-length mystery short stories.

D. J. Bart, author of "Who Is Jim Vogelbaugh?" is one of several writers in AHMM's history to move from The Mysterious Photograph to the "regular" pages of the magazine, and we're very pleased to welcome him anew. (See The Story That Won in the December 1991 issue.) When he's not writing, he is being a business consultant

(continued on page 226)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Elana Lore**, Managing Editor; **Terri Czczko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Carole Dixon**, Production Director; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Elizabeth Beatty**, Circulation Director; **Phyllis Jessen**, Circulation Planning Director; **Christian Dorbandt**, Newsstand Marketing Director; **Dennis Jones**, Newsstand Operations Manager; **Veena Raghavan**, Director, Special Projects; **Irene Bozoki**, Classified Advertising Director; **Barbara Zinkhen**, Classified Advertising Manager; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Coordinator (New York: 212-557-9100).

Joel Davis, President; **Joe DeFalco**, Vice President, Finance; **Mary Tzimokas**, Vice President, Circulation; **Carl Bartee**, Vice President, Manufacturing; **A. Bruce Chatterton**, Publisher.

SHADOW WHISPERS

WENDY HALEY

SHADOW WHISPERS

A chilling novel
of suspense
by Wendy Haley

Available now in your local
bookstore or call ZEBRA at
1-800-221-2647

ISBN# 0-8217-3750-3

She was always in
her sister's
shadow...
and that's just
where the killer
waited for her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Small Talk

by Terry Courtney

Frankie Ice slid into the rear booth across from Bellinger. "Ready for a taste, lieutenant?"

Bellinger held up his glass to show Frankie that it was almost full. He would not have recognized Frankie on the street. The once lean, handsome Mediterranean face was jowly, the trim body running to bloat. His hair had turned a dirty gray.

Frankie called to the waitress. "Double V.O. water, honey."

Bellinger said, "Why the meet, Frankie?"

"Nothing special, lieutenant. Just a couple of old players getting together for some small talk. You know, old times."

Bellinger knew. It was Frankie's meet, and men like Frankie had a near obsessive compulsion to indulge in some verbal broken field running before they could come to the point of a conversation. That's the way it was, that's the way it had always been. Bellinger would be patient. Sometimes it paid off, sometimes it did not, but he had to know.

The waitress slid Frankie's drink onto the table and left. Bellinger said, "How's it going, Frankie? Jewelry still your specialty? Climbing through windows that don't belong to you?"

Frankie shrugged.

"I gave that up. I got a few things going for me. Nothing important, but I'm comfortable, thank you."

Bellinger knew exactly what Frankie had going for him. "But they still call you Frankie Ice."

"You know a name, lieutenant. It stays with a guy forever."

"Like Tony Bags."

"Sure, like that. Tony ain't stuffed pieces of anybody in plastic in fifteen years, but he's still Tony Bags."

"Until the day he gets stuffed into something."

Frankie waved away the thought. "Tony Bags is retired in Arizona. Nobody wants him for anything. He'll die in bed."

"One of the chosen few."

"See, you understand the way it is, lieutenant. You and me, we're oldtime players. We know what's happening. I said that just



TONY THE BLIMP WAS DOING WHAT HE DID BEST: EATING WITH BOTH HANDS.

the other day. I said that Lieutenant Bellinger goes way back and knows how the game is played, you know?"

"What game is that, Frankie?" Bellinger asked, his creased, well used face without expression. He looked exactly like what he was: a cop who had seen and heard too much during his twenty-seven years on the force. His hair was more salt than pepper these days. The job did that to a man.

"The game," Frankie said. "Come on, you know what I mean. My people and your people. We do certain things to try to make some money. Your people don't approve of some of the things we do to make money and try to catch us at it. If you don't catch us, we make money. If you do catch us, you give us free vacations downstate at the granite hotel. It's a simple game. And you know one thing that has always been true? How the game is played. When we make money, your people never take it personal and when we get vacations, we never take it personal. It's a rule of the game. You get my drift?"

Bellinger nodded. Frankie was getting there.

Frankie sipped his bourbon. "Because if people, mine or yours, was to take it personal, then the game would get nasty, sloppy, and my people would not like that to happen. I don't think your people would like it, either."

"You mean Carmine Anzalone wouldn't like it," Bellinger said.

"You know names ain't cool, lieutenant."

Bellinger ignored the reproach. "Somebody taking something personal, Frankie?"

Frankie made a face. "Once in a while you get a guy with a bad case of dumb. It happens."

Bellinger waited while Frankie signaled the waitress for a refill. Frankie was silent until he had his fresh drink and they were alone again.

He sipped and Bellinger waited.

Finally Frankie sighed loudly, his glass thunking on the table. "You remember a player named Salvatore Minella, lieutenant?"

Bellinger mentally sorted through the felon file in his memory, and the name dropped into place. "Three or four years ago. Extortion of a building contractor."

"It was five years ago. Sal got caught by a wire, and that bought him a nickel downstate."

"I remember. He made a rookie mistake."

"Nobody's perfect. Sal got the vacation, and word comes back

that he is doing hard time. Very hard time. And that worried my people."

"I'll bet it did."

"Right, because when a guy is doing hard time, your people are always visiting him, offering him Christmas candy if he will tell them stories. You know?"

Bellinger's eyebrows rose and fell. "It's part of the game," he said with the hint of a smile.

"So my people send people to see Sal all the time, just to make sure he understands that he shouldn't be telling no stories to nobody. And these people come back saying how bad Sal is doing down there."

"I never heard of Minella dealing." Bellinger realized that Frankie was not quite there yet.

"That's the point. He didn't deal. No stories, no candy. He stayed together, which makes what happened so unreal. He didn't do the whole nickel. Four years and change. He got out two weeks ago and came home for his benefits."

"What benefits?" This was new to Bellinger.

"Maybe you don't know about that. It ain't a thing we talk about. See, when a player goes away there are two benefits. First, his family is taken care of, in Sal's case a wife and kid."

"I know about the family thing. Did it happen?"

"For about two years. Then Sal's wife divorced him and married some upright dude who works for the phone company. They moved to a far suburb, and she said she didn't want anything anymore, to leave her alone. Sal told somebody it was all right, he was glad to get rid of her."

"And the other benefit?"

"A guy who goes on vacation and is cool has ten grand a year waiting for him when he gets out."

"For not telling stories."

"That and a stake. So Sal comes home, and even though he didn't do the full five, they gave him fifty large."

Bellinger snorted. "I was him I'd be in the Bahamas."

Frankie's grin had no mirth in it. "He just might be at that."

"What do you mean?"

"Lieutenant, we got a problem with Sal right now. When Sal got his money, my people told him to take a month off. Get an apartment, a car, clothes, visit some ladies, get back in the life. Come back in a month, he can go back to work. So he got all those things,

except I wouldn't know about the ladies. And he went around seeing all his old friends, one of which is Louie Guarino, who is a player I know you definitely know."

"Once upon a time I arranged a vacation for him."

"I know about that. So, Sal and Louie are tight. Partners. And Sal tells Louie that the time in the joint is so bad it is a thing he can't forget and won't forgive. And he is going to do something about it, a solo number. He is going to off the man who did it to him." Frankie's voice went quiet. "That would be Kerwin."

Bellinger did not fully grasp the meaning of what Frankie had said for a moment, then his eyes blinked rapidly. "Adam Kerwin? Detective Sergeant Adam Kerwin?"

"The same."

"Sweet Jesus! Is Minella insane? Doesn't he realize what he could start?"

"Maybe, maybe not, but he don't seem to care. But my people know, and they care very much. Louie Guarino told somebody who told somebody else who told another party, and it got back. You know what small talk can be. So word is sent to Sal that he will not do anything that stupid and that is an order. And Sal sends word back which is in fact two words and they are not Happy Easter."

"That must have shocked the bile out of Carmine... your people."

"Definitely. So a couple of guys were called in."

"Hitters?" Bellinger asked.

"A couple of guys to convince Sal of the error of his thinking."

"Hitters," Bellinger declared.

"Only Sal got word maybe, or maybe just figured, and he disappeared. And that's where we are now, lieutenant. My people have looked everywhere they could think of; family, friends, every hidey hole we know of. He's gone, vanished. But he's out there carrying a very large hate for one of your people."

"What do you want from me, Frankie? Specifically."

"Look, you got the whole police force and that national computer and that all points thing and all. Maybe you could find Sal where we can't. All we want you to do is try. You get him picked up for something and make sure he's held wherever it is until our couple of guys can get there, then let him go. You make a phone call, tell us where he is, we tell you how long to hold him, and that's all. We take it from there and you don't know how it happened. Nobody

wants him to ruin the game. This is just as important to us as it is to you."

"I see where you're coming from, but I'm not sure we can do that. It will have to work through the captain. I'll do my best."

"Do better than that, lieutenant. We're talking one of your friends got a target on his back."

"Minella must have the I.Q. of a turnip."

"The joint does different things to different guys. And you should maybe talk Kerwin into taking a vacation until we find Sal. It could save his life."

"I know Adam Kerwin. He runs from no man."

Frankie made a noise with his mouth and slowly shook his head. "That attitude ain't always smart. You know how Sal got connected in the first place: a judge put him in the army for two years. In there they discovered he was a natural with a rifle. Two years and all he did was shoot on some kind of army rifle team. Contests or whatever. He said if he had stayed in the army he could have been in the Olympics. But he came out and was doing odd jobs for my people. Strictly errand boy stuff. Then a matter came up that needed a guy good with a rifle. A long-range thing. Somebody remembered Sal, and they gave him the work. He did a nice, clean job, and that got him a little action of his own. There were two more rifle jobs after that. Each time Sal did good work and got a little more of the pie. Then he went away."

"An expert rifleman. I didn't know. Lordy."

"You see what I'm getting at? Sal could hit Kerwin from half a block away, and Kerwin would be dead before the sound got to him. Listen, with the guns they make now, Sal could do it from two blocks away with one of those scope things. And remember, Sal's got all the cash he needs to buy any kind of rifle he wants."

Bellinger slid out of the booth. "Thanks, Frankie. I owe you one. We'll keep in touch."

Frankie Ice did not reply. Instead he handed Bellinger a folded piece of paper with a telephone number printed on it.

Captain Wexler's round, ruddy face constantly changed expression as he listened to Bellinger. When the lieutenant finished his recital, Wexler said, "We must locate Kerwin right away, and that could be a big problem."

"I've got that working, captain. I called dispatch on the way in. Adam is out on an investigation. I impressed upon them the ur-

gency of the situation, and they will try to contact him every ten minutes and tell him to check in with you or me. The question is, can we go all out to find Minella?"

"We have no choice. He is urgently wanted for questioning in a homicide case. Please hold and notify."

"I'll get it out, local and national." Bellinger started to stand up.

"Stay a minute, lieutenant. I think I had better fill you in on the entire situation, like why locating Kerwin quickly could be a problem. Also, the real reason Carmine A. did us this favor."

Bellinger's expression reflected his puzzlement.

"What I say doesn't leave this room." The captain picked up a pencil and rolled it between his palms. "For the past three-plus months Adam Kerwin has been on Carmine A.'s payroll."

Bellinger jerked forward. "Adam Kerwin on the pad? I don't believe it. There isn't a more honest man alive than Adam."

"It took us almost a year to set it up, but it worked to perfection." The captain's mouth turned down at the corners. "Until now."

"You mean it's a sting?"

"Exactly. We picked Kerwin because he's single, so no family would be hurt. In addition, his partner had applied for a transfer to Homicide over a year ago, so we sent him over there and he believed it was routine. We didn't give Kerwin another partner. He went through a typical scenario. Gambling heavier and heavier, got in debt to the bookies, went to a loan shark and then couldn't make the payments. It was inevitable that Carmine A. would make him an offer he couldn't refuse."

"What was Adam doing to earn his keep?"

"For the first two or three weeks it was simple things. Tip them off in advance of raids. We had to set up raids we normally would never have conducted just so Kerwin could pass the word. Then it got more complicated. They had Kerwin arrange that none of our cars were in a certain area on a particular night at specified times. Keep the coast clear so they could pull off high dollar burglaries. Exclusive jewelry stores, appliance warehouses, like that. And when that went well, they got greedy and had him clearing out areas for big-volume drug deliveries. Truckloads."

"You know my next question. What do we get in return?"

"Videotapes. We set up hidden surveillance units on loan from the FBI, equipped with camcorders. They get the drug busts. We've got tapes of every job they did. That scum will go into shock when they find out how many of them are movie stars."

"How long were you going to play it?"

"We were day to day. When we felt it had run its course, we planned a cattle call. Wholesale arrests, with the tapes to guarantee the cases would hold up in court. We already have enough to burn twenty-five or thirty of those dirtbags."

"I see what you mean about the favor."

"Of course. They certainly don't want Minella to kill Kerwin, but not primarily because of the trouble it would start, although that is a consideration. No, their main concern is Minella's cutting off their pipeline to the department. Their protection."

"Even so, we still have to find Kerwin and get him out of sight until somebody finds Minella, and finding him is our first priority."

The captain got up and walked around to perch on the corner of his desk. "I agree, Minella is our prime target. But as I said, locating Kerwin could be difficult. He only checks in every three or four days. Right now he's supposed to be investigating that warehouse burglary on Reeve Avenue. That's a cover for the department. He knows who did that job. We have it on tape. So off he goes for days, supposedly investigating, only I don't know where he actually goes. The track, the movies, to see his girl, to see Carmine A. I know that one time he went to the country for a few days. But there is one positive aspect to that. If we don't know where he is, then neither does Minella." The captain stood and steered Bellinger out the door. "Get the word out on Minella. Each and every source and agency, especially the FBI. And keep after dispatch."

As Bellinger turned to leave, a sergeant approached, his face a twisted, frozen mask. "Captain."

"Yes?"

"Captain."

"What is it, Bill? Speak up."

The sergeant passed a hand across his forehead. "It's Sergeant Kerwin. A... a sniper... dear God. The sergeant was shot through the head as he came out of an apartment building on Fifty-second Street. He's dead."

The captain seemed to grow smaller, shrivel up inside himself. "That's where his mother lives." He wheeled around and rushed inside his office, slamming the door.

Bellinger realized he had stopped breathing and slowly exhaled. He shook himself, patted the sergeant on the arm, and headed for the communication section. His mourning and rage would have to wait.

Frankie Ice took a long drink of the best bourbon dishonest money could buy, made a contented sound, and grinned. "I'm telling you, I should get one of them Oscars. I was great."

Across from Frankie, seated behind an ornate, handcarved teakwood desk, Carmine A. nodded his leonine head. He was sixty-nine years old and looked fifty, his facial skin as tight as the plastic surgeon could pull it without turning his head inside out.

Frankie said, "Bellinger bit like a starving carp. About now there is one huge manhunt out for Sal. But they believe he acted on his own, and they won't lay it at your doorstep. They think we want him as bad as they do."

Carmine A. had a laugh like dry sticks breaking. "You think they're ever going to find Sal?" He laughed again.

Frankie laughed with him. "They might. All they got to do is dig up a hunk of the new freeway."

"Every time I ride over that part, I'm going to say a prayer for good old Sal."

"This is the best thing he ever done for us."

"The Kerwin hit went well?"

"Smooth as a pool table."

Carmine A. scowled. "That Kerwin was a rat bastard. He fooled me, and that's what hurts the most. I'm not supposed to be easy to fool. You got any idea how many good people have to leave town because of him and his videotapes? Who would have figured? Movies of every job. All those people with their faces on film. Rat bastard."

"So now he's a dead rat bastard, and that's something. Also, it could have been worse. It could have gone on a lot longer. The important thing is nobody is going to blame you."

Carmine A. stood up, dismissing Ice. "Stop and see Gino on the way out. He's got something for you."

Bellinger looked around the restaurant and spotted Tony Guarino sitting at a rear table. Tony the Blimp was doing what he did best: eating with both hands. The lieutenant snaked his way among the tables and sat down.

Tony looked up and said, "Please, lieutenant, not while I'm eating."

Bellinger stared at him.

Through a mouthful of linguini with clam sauce Tony said,

"What do you want? Can't I eat in peace?"

"Don't sweat, if that's possible. I'm not looking for you. You hear about Sergeant Kerwin?"

"Who hasn't?"

"I'm looking for your brother."

"What do you want Louie for?"

"Actually, I'm not looking for him, either."

"You got a funny way of not looking for people."

"Louie's not in trouble, so tell me where he is. I just want to talk to him. It's Minella I'm after."

"Louie don't know where Sal is. I can tell you that."

"I would rather he told me himself."

"I'll tell you the truth, lieutenant. I ain't seen my brother in days. As long as you're not looking for him, why don't you try his house?"

"I did. He hasn't been home in five days. His wife doesn't know where he is, and she's worried. He's just gone."

"Him and a lot of other guys. Why do you think Louie knows where Sal is?"

"Louie was the last person I know of who saw Minella. Minella told him he was going to kill Kerwin. Maybe he also told Louie where he was going to run."

Tony slowly and deliberately propped his fork and spoon on either side of his plate, laced his fat fingers on his round stomach, and looked Bellinger in the eyes. "None of what you just said is true, lieutenant. Louie never saw Sal after he came home. Sal never told him anything about no killing, so don't lay that on Louie."

"Minella and your brother got together a few days after Minella was released from prison. Minella told him things."

"That never happened. It was supposed to, but it didn't. Louie told me Sal called him up and wanted a get-together. They were supposed to meet right here. Louie showed up, but Sal never did. Louie said he waited almost three hours. And he ain't seen or heard from Sal since."

"Maybe Louie lied to you."

Tony's eyelids drooped for a moment. "Listen to yourself, lieutenant. Why would Louie lie? He knows I don't care one way or the other if he meets or don't meet Sal. Why would he lie to me?"

He wouldn't, Bellinger thought. But Frankie Ice had definitely said it was Louie Guarino who had started the word about Mi-

nella's intention to kill Kerwin. A sudden thought caused Bellinger to catch his breath. He nurtured it, coaxed it, probed it. Could it be? Yes, it was possible. And if that was the way of it, who designed it for you, Carmine A.? You're as subtle as a dog with gas. The longer Bellinger explored the possibility, the more outraged he became. Why me? Why think you could use me? They must have some fine opinion of my intelligence. And they were almost right.

He turned to Tony the Blimp. "What did you mean, Louie and a lot of other people are missing?"

"Just guys who are around all the time suddenly aren't. All of a sudden I don't see them around, and people are looking for them."

"Like who?"

"Like Davey Cohn and that lunatic he runs with."

"Izzy the Rabbi?"

"That's him. They're always around together, almost every night, and I ain't seen them in as long as I ain't seen my brother. And the Santoni brothers. Stan and Ollie. Their sister has been calling all over for them. Their father is real sick, and she can't find them."

And your brother, Bellinger thought, and he was certain. He saw it in all its flawed symmetry. And he was supposed to be a key player. He fought back his anger. "Stay put, Tony. I need the phone. I'll be back."

"My linguini got cold," Tony complained, showcasing his priorities.

"Order more on me." Bellinger went to the telephone and called headquarters. Several transfers reached the captain. "Captain, do you know exactly who you have on those tapes? Which players got filmed in the act?"

"I think I can remember most of them. Why?"

"It's important. Were two of them Davey Cohn and Izzy the Rabbi?"

"Three times."

"And the Santoni brothers? They're called Stan and Ollie."

"That was the jewelry store on Pinson Boulevard. The big job."

"What about Louie Guarino?"

"Yes."

Bellinger laid his arm across the top of the telephone box and rested his forehead on it. He was tired. So very tired. Of so many things. "Minella is dead, captain. He's been dead almost since the time he got out of prison. I can't prove it yet, but I know it. Some-

how they got wise to Kerwin and wanted him dead. Minella was smoke so we wouldn't come back on Carmine A. when Kerwin got hit. They even used a sniper with a rifle, Minella's specialty. We're supposed to spend eternity looking for Minella, and we won't even find his body. The people I just named have probably left town. Make your arrests now, tonight. They know about the tapes and what jobs Kerwin cushioned. The men who pulled those jobs have been warned. Trust me on this. And captain, you could have a leak in the department. Or maybe in the fed film crews."

"Those rotten . . . what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see a man about two murders. Ice said something about taking things personal. They tried to use me and almost made it work. I take that very personally. I'm going to fire on Fort Sumter."

"You're what?"

"I'm about to declare war." Bellinger hung up before the captain could reply, walked back to Tony Guarino, and stood staring down at him.

Tony said, "What?"

"You know what you are, Tony? You and your brother."

"Yes, lieutenant," Tony said, quietly and perhaps sadly. "We know exactly what we are, and that gives us a leg up on a lot of people."

"I'll tell you what you are. You're loose ends that somebody forgot all about. And loose ends always unravel."

"I don't understand."

"But you will, probably the hardest way. So long. And Tony, thanks for the small talk."

No Harm in Alfie

by W. Sherwood Hartman

There's always a tiny vise of terror that twists my insides when the phone rings. I realize that coming from a county sheriff this sounds strange, but it's true. I receive dozens of calls a day. Most of them are nothing but small talk or righteous gripes from the citizens, but you never know until you lift the receiver which call is going to knife through your spine like an icicle. I got one of those calls last night, and I hope eternity passes before I get another.

It had been a long hot day filled with petty things that fray a man's patience. When I could finally relax, I was too tired to sleep. The late show was on, and somewhere between the commercials I must have dozed off. The jangling of the phone startled me awake. I turned off the TV and answered. "Sheriff Jackson speaking."

"This is Dr. Fanus at the Pleasant Valley Hospital. I'm afraid I have to report that one of our patients, an Alfred Loomis, has left our bed and board."

There was a hot knot in my chest as his words sank home in my mind. "You let Alfie escape?" I whispered, not trusting my normal voice.

"*Escape* is not exactly the word, sheriff. After all, Pleasant Valley is a mental hospital, not a prison."

"How long has he been gone?" I asked, looking at the clock on the wall. It was twenty past twelve.

"I can't tell you exactly," the doctor said. "He was here at nine, at lights out, but his bed was empty when we checked at midnight. We searched the grounds, but he's nowhere to be found."

"Did you call his brother?"

"No," the doctor said. "I thought it would be best to call you first. The man could be dangerous."

"He never was before they put him away."

"Sheriff, I had nothing to do with that."

It was true. Doc Fanus just ran the place. He had no say over who was sent there. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'll call Tom right away, and thanks." I hung up and wondered what I had thanked him for.

It was August, and the thermometer read a steaming eighty-five. The air outside was heavy and still. It was the kind of night for a storm that would send the hounds of hell scurrying under their master's bed, and Alfie was loose, roaming the countryside. . . . But I guessed I shouldn't blame Doc. If the state would pay decent wages at a place like Pleasant Valley, perhaps they could hire some reliable security people.

I dialed Tom Loomis's phone number and waited for him to answer, while running time and distance through my mind. Pleasant Valley was nine miles east of town and Tom Loomis's farm was three miles west. Figuring that a man can make four miles an hour on foot, Alfie could have already reached the farm if he left the hospital just after nine, but four miles an hour would be hard to do on a moonless night across rough country. Alfie would shun the roads, yet he knew every path and lane through the woods and brush like the map of veins on the back of his hand. The phone at Tom's rang for nearly five minutes and there was no answer. I hung up and dialed again, thinking that I might have dialed wrong the first time. There was still no answer. I waited for ten rings, then hung up and called my deputy.

Jake had a rough time getting awake, but when I told him that Alfie was loose he was all business. I told him I couldn't get a rise out of Tom Loomis or his wife and that I was heading out to their farm right away. He was to get help and follow as soon as he could. I had no idea of what I'd find, but the thought of help behind me was welcome. After I hung up, I had the feeling that I might be too late to help anybody. I buckled on my sidearm and took a repeating shotgun off the rack and loaded it with buckshot. I was headed for the door when the phone rang again. It was Fred Acker.

"Sheriff," he said, "I hate to bother you, but something woke me up about five minutes ago. I thought I heard a noise, and when I went downstairs the screen door was hanging open. I thought that maybe my wife had forgotten to hook it, but then I noticed my carbine is missing from back of the stove."

"Your dogs didn't wake you?"

"They never made a sound, sheriff. There's only one man could ever walk past my dogs and take a pie off my windowsill without them raising hades."

"Alfie?"

"Who else? They should have never put him away. Mame used to bake an extra pie every Friday just so Alfie could steal it. It was

always a surprise to find what he would leave in its place—a fresh-killed rabbit, or a pheasant, or a bag of ripe chestnuts. But, sheriff, stealing my rifle isn't *fun* stealing! And Alfie *is* over at Pleasant Valley, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid he isn't, Fred," I said. "He escaped sometime tonight, but if he'd had any thought of harming you or Mame, you wouldn't be talking to me now. So go back to bed. I'll try to get your rifle back." I hung up and tried to get through to Tom Loomis again, but there was still no answer. At least I knew now that Alfie was only five minutes away from Tom's farm, but I didn't know if he was on his way there or on his way away from there. I pushed the pickup for all it was worth over the rutted dirt road toward Tom's farm, and the harder I drove, the more I agreed with Fred. They never should have put Alfie away.

Tom and Alfie Loomis had inherited the farm after the old folks had passed on. Tom was the younger son, but with Alfie's mind the way it was, Tom took over running the place. The way it was run left a lot to be desired, but they made a living. There was a horse named Star that no one except Alfie could get near. Alfie and Star would plow the fields in the spring, but after that chore was finished they would wander off for weeks at a time, leaving Tom to work the fields after the planting. Even when Alfie was home, he never slept in the house. He'd bed down with a blanket in the stall next to Star's. Alfie, a big man with a shaggy head of unkempt hair and soft brown eyes, was so shy that few people had ever seen him close up, but he was a familiar blur in the distance sitting astride Star with neither saddle nor bridle, as though they both knew where they were going and had no reason to communicate with anyone else.

Alfie was strange, that's true. He could talk to animals, and he was afraid of people. Perhaps he had a reason. But I could never see where there was an ounce of harm in him. Nobody else could, either. He might walk past your dogs in the middle of the night and take a dozen eggs out of your henhouse, but you'd find a big bag of dew-fresh wild strawberries on your doorstep in the morning, or something else that was worth more in time and thought than the thing that was taken.

Yet all of these things sounded bad when Tom Loomis went to court to have Alfie put away. They'd put a warrant in my hand and told me to bring Alfie in. I found him sleeping in the barn and sweet-talked him into putting his hands out for me to put the cuffs

on. Then Star started kicking splinters out of the stall next door, and Alfie went berserk. I managed to deliver him to Pleasant Valley but had three cracked ribs to live with for the next few months. All that happened two years ago, shortly after Millie came to town.

As far as I can understand, Millie arrived with a truck driver from up north and stayed on as a waitress at the Easy-Bee Cafe. She must have been hitchhiking because the truck driver left and Millie remained to remind our little community of how far we were behind the times. From the rear she rippled under the tight white uniform, and when she put a cup of coffee down in front of you, there was nothing to do but start counting freckles.

I don't know if it was the ripples or the freckles, but it wasn't too long until Tom Loomis and Millie were a regular thing together. Then Tom had Alfie put away, and he and Millie got married and moved into the farm. I guess it was only natural for Tom to have Alfie committed. With a woman like Millie around, and Alfie not being altogether responsible, anything could have happened. Still, it didn't seem right, depriving Alfie of his freedom and the half ownership of the farm that was rightfully his. I had done my job, but I hadn't liked it.

I liked it even less when I pulled up in front of Tom Loomis's farm and found the place as dark as the bottom of a well.

I laid a hand to the horn, but no lights came on.

It had been months since I had been to Tom's farm. Millie had greeted me wearing a thin shift that left little to the imagination as she bounced barefoot down the porch steps. "Tom's trying to feed that fool horse," she said. I followed her to the barn. Star was standing with his head down and his lips stretched across his teeth, a powerful coiling spring of concentrated hate daring Tom to enter the stall. Tom opened the door and shoved a bucket of oats inside, then slammed the door shut as Star lunged forward, his hooves slashing the heavy oak. "That horse is crazy," Tom said. "When Alfie was here, he would at least tolerate me. Now he goes insane the minute I walk into the barn."

"Can't you sell him?" I asked.

"Who would buy?" he laughed. "Everybody around here knows that nobody can work him but Alfie. I'll keep trying to bring him around for a few months. Then if he don't calm down, I'll have to put him away."

Star stopped chewing his oats and lifted his head to watch us, almost as though he understood what was being said.

"He's a beautiful animal," I said. "It seems a shame."

Tom lowered his head for a moment, then his eyes leveled with mine. "Sometimes, Sheriff Jack," he said slowly, "a man has to do things that don't make him too proud of himself." The hurt in his eyes told me that having Alfie put away hadn't been *his* idea.

"The sooner that damned animal goes," Millie shrilled, "the better I'll feel." Star laid his ears back and curled his lip in a horsey sneer. I had left then, almost embarrassed for having been there.

I leaned on the horn again, but there was still no response. The house was a silhouette of india ink in the dim night. I turned off the lights of the pickup and took the five cell flashlight out of the glove compartment. Then I cradled the shotgun in my left arm and walked carefully to the house. After the racking noise of the horn, the silence was overpowering. Only the soft scent of the barnyard seemed real. Even the crickets had stopped breathing, and my soft footsteps sounded as loud as drums. A loose board squealed under my weight as I crossed the porch. The door was unlocked and sighed as I pushed it open. I flashed the light slowly across the combination kitchen-living room. The dinner dishes and coffee cups were still at their place on the table. The room was empty. I didn't turn on the lights, regardless of the silence. I knew I wasn't alone on the farm. I checked all the rooms. The house was empty. I went back out on the front porch and listened.

There was a sound of a motor in the distance, and I sighed with relief at the thought that help was on the way. Then I heard the sound of movement from the stable. I crouched low and ran across the yard to the front of the barn. The doors were open. I swung the beam of my flashlight inside and shivered at what I saw. Millie was a bloodied broken doll, her face hidden in the straw. Tom was seated a few feet past her, slumped against the wall with his head hanging at an impossible angle. I swung the light slowly around and saw Star, the door to his stall open. Then I had a glimpse of Alfie crouched beside the horse with his rifle leveled. The flashlight smashed out of my hand as he fired, and my arm went numb up to the elbow. I ran back along the front of the barn, out of the line of fire, and stretched out prone with the shotgun leveled toward the doors.

Then there was another shot from inside and a scream that was too huge to be human, then a long sigh and silence. *He shot the horse*, I thought. *Why did he shoot the horse?*

I didn't have time to think about it. Jake's car pulled around the

house, and the headlights turned the front of the barn to daylight. Alfie stepped through the door and put a bullet through one headlight, but he didn't have a chance to fire again. The shotgun kicked against my shoulder and tore the life out of him with one lethal whirlwind of buckshot. I pushed the gun away and buried my face in my arms.

Jake was shaking me. "Are you all right, Sheriff Jack?"

"Sure," I said, but I was lying. Somewhere, in the tiny second after I fired the shotgun, the picture of what the flashlight had shown inside the barn flashed across my mind, and I knew I shouldn't have shot him. But it had all happened so fast, and it was final. I got to my feet and we went into the barn. Jake's flashlight found the light switch and it was all there before us.

"Good lord," Jake gasped. "What did he beat them with?"

Tom's rifle lay beside him, the stock splintered and useless.

"Alfie didn't beat them," I said. "Look at the blood. It's brown now, not red. They were dead before Alfie ever left Pleasant Valley. Look at the horse." Star's front hooves were caked with dried blood. "Millie must have finally talked Tom into putting the horse away, but something went wrong." I looked at the door of Star's stall and knew what it was. The latch had torn loose and was hanging on bent and rusted nails. "This is what Alfie found when he got home. He knew what had to be done, but Tom's rifle was broken, so he went over to Acker's and stole the carbine. He must have got back here about the same time I arrived. Star was Alfie's horse. If anyone had the right to put him away, it was Alfie."

"But why did he come out shooting?" Jake asked.

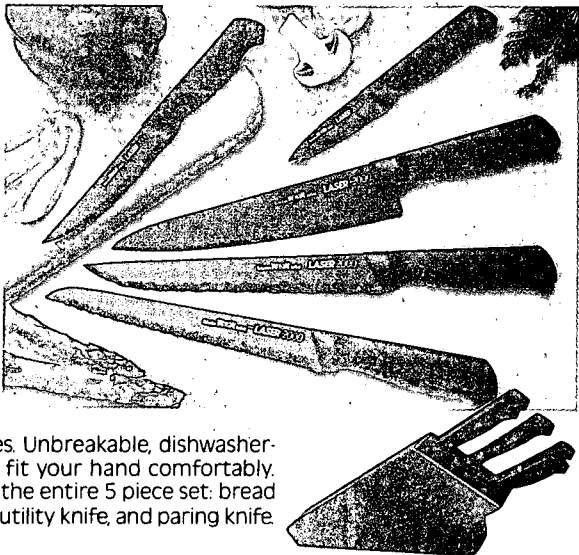
"He shot the flashlight out of my hand. That bullet could just as easily have gone between my eyes. And the shot that put out your headlight could have gone through the windshield. Alfie wasn't aiming to hurt anybody. He was just making sure he didn't have to go back to Pleasant Valley."

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

The secret behind Regent Scheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife.

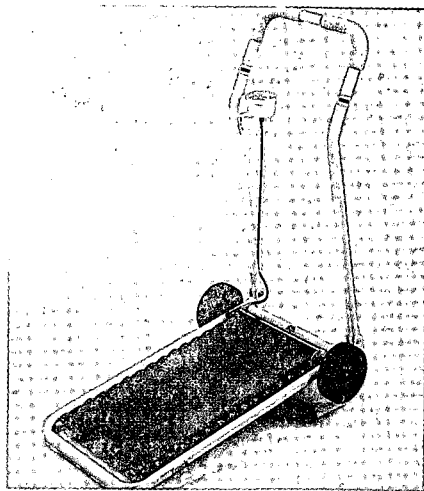
\$129.98 (\$7.00) #A1933.



▼ FOLDAWAY EXERTRACK™

Staying in shape is vital for our health and well being with today's lifestyle. Getting to the gym may not always be easy in our busy lives. We have just the answer for all you people on the go or just for the ones who enjoy to get fit at home. That's why the Foldaway Exertrack is the perfect way to exercise. This personal treadmill has a speedometer/odometer to monitor speed and progress. It measures 38"x21"x3" and features a safe rubber track and an adjustable handlebar that faces forward or backward for running and walking comfort. No electrical connections or motors needed. Exercise has never been simpler. Order one today and get on the right track with the Exertrack. Folds away for easy storage, lightweight and compact. At a great price!

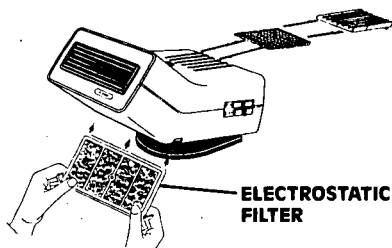
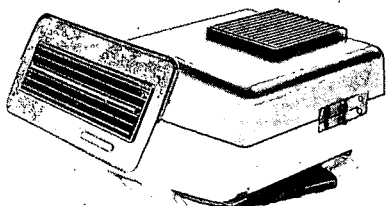
\$131.98 (\$15.00) #A1977.



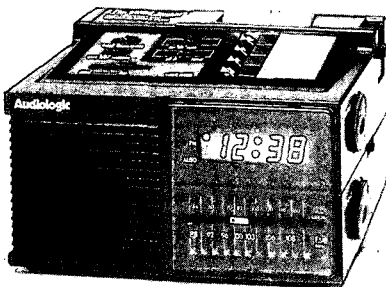
MAIL ORDER MALL

BREATHE EASIER WITH THE AIR PROCESSOR

Clean air is vital to overall good health and general well-being and there is growing concern about the quality of the air around us. Amcor's Air Processor is uniquely designed to remove indoor air pollution and improve air quality. This compact unit has a high voltage generator that produces negatively charged ions that clean the air of cigarette/cigar smoke, dust, pollen, fungal and bacterial particles as well as a host of other allergy stimuli. The Air Processor also features a blower for air circulation and a unique filter that is permanent and washable. Includes a free ionoscope that detects the negative ions emitted from the ion generator and proves that it is functioning. Very quiet so it is perfect for any room in your house. UL listed. **\$99.98** (\$6.50) #A2002.



SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER



Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audiologic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! **\$89.98** (\$5.50) #A2000.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in () payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** Dept. 062 AH; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

Magalog Marketing Group Inc. © 1991
1905 Swarthmore Ave, Lakewood, N.J. 08701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Worthsayer

by Stanley Schmidt

I knew something was up when I got the call to go at once to Room 333. As the house detective for a hotel where not much happens, I often fill my days making spot checks of rooms that have been vacated and not yet rerented. I have a key that opens *everything* in the Fritz—except that two weeks ago they changed the lock on 333. I hadn't seen the inside since. Most peculiar, and a bit insulting.

Manager George Wilcox was waiting by the door, wringing his chubby hands nervously. With him was a guy I didn't recognize, tall and rangy with curly black hair, wearing an impeccable Brooks Brothers suit and an expression no less distraught than George's.

"What's up?" I asked.

"We're not sure," said George. "It *could* be murder, but . . . oh, you'll have to see it all for yourself anyway, so we might as well get it over with. I'd like you to meet Mr. Charles Everett Oswald, CEO of Korag, Karfingel, Thatterthwaite, and Phui."

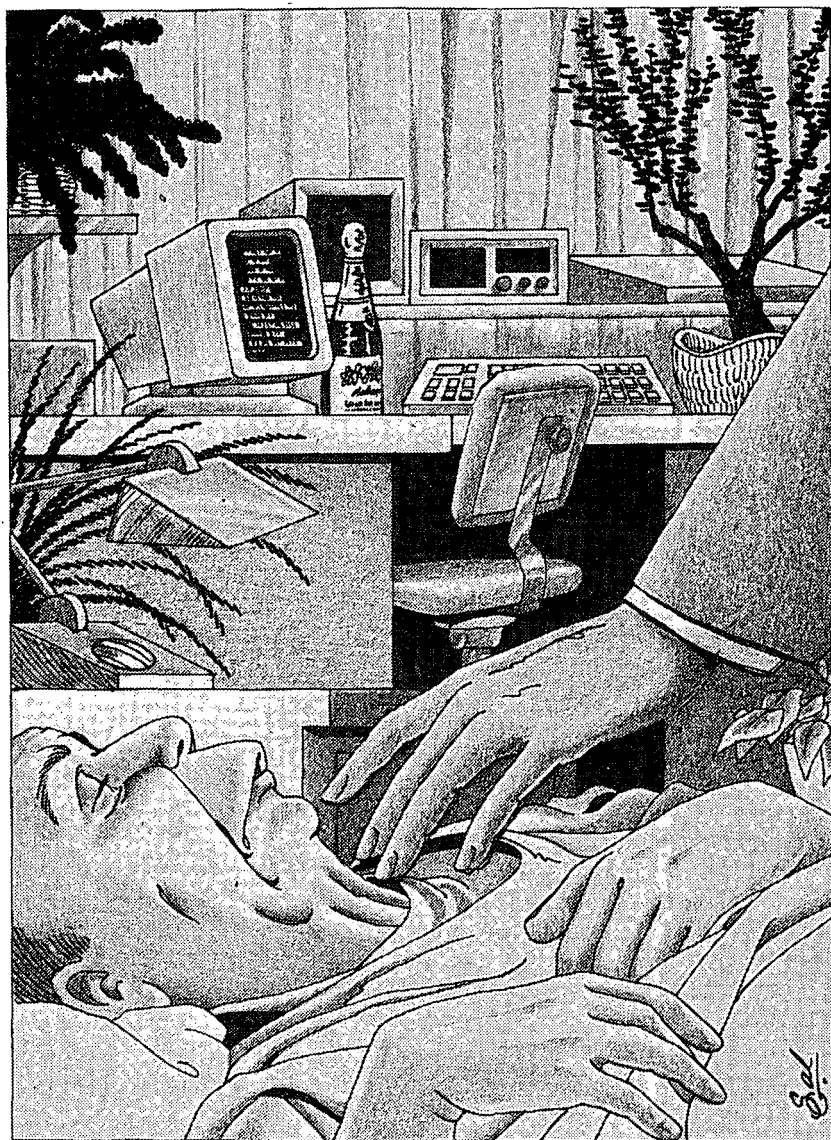
I blinked as I took Oswald's hand. "The stockbrokerage?"

"The same," he said gravely.

"Of course," said George. "They rented this room for one of their . . . er . . . employees. Now let's go inside. Brace yourself, Rik."

He opened the door and a blast of desert air hit me full in the face—hot, dry, and heavy with an odor I couldn't place. I remembered when 333 had looked like all our other rooms, but it sure didn't now. There were plants all over, vaguely tropical-looking yet somehow wrong. The most conspicuous item of furniture was an overgrown computer workstation, fairly ordinary except that it sported dozens of little screens. There was a desk with nothing on it but what looked like a cereal box with labels in a foreign alphabet, a plastic letter opener, and a wine bottle. And there was a bed with a body on it—a most surprising body.

It's one of them! I thought incredulously. At a quick glance, it could have passed for human—a wiry, leathery little old man with



IT'S ONE OF THEM! I THOUGHT INCREDULOUSLY.

a froggy face. But look at it for three seconds and you'd see that it was *too* wiry, too leathery, too froggy.

Everybody knew what the Tsigan looked like. As the first aliens to visit Earth, the papers and newscasts had been full of them for three months. Never in a million years would I have expected to find one murdered in my own hotel.

If, I reminded myself, it *was* murder. After all, I asked myself, how could a being with the gift of precognition let itself be murdered?

"His name was Azuk," said Oswald. "I became suspicious when he didn't report in this morning. I came over, and . . ." He gestured around the room. "Naturally, I suspect foul play."

"Maybe," I said, though I saw no recognizable signs of it. There was no sign of a scuffle, no damage I could recognize to the body. I couldn't begin to read the expression frozen on the corpse's face. "Any particular reason?"

"He was in good health yesterday," said Oswald. "And he made us a *lot* of money. Maybe somebody didn't like that. In any case, it seems like too much coincidence to assume this is natural."

"Maybe," I repeated. "First we have to determine which it was. I need a coroner's report, and I doubt that any human doctor is qualified to do one. We'll have to get one of *them* in to do it."

Both Oswald and George went a little white. "You mean a Tsigan?" Oswald said finally.

"That's right."

Oswald was silent quite a while. "That's going to be . . . awkward."

"How so?" I asked.

"I'd rather discuss that privately . . . when we're finished here."

I shrugged. "No problem. Let me look around a little first." I did, taking my time and letting them squirm a bit. I couldn't find anything on the computer except financial data. The champagne bottle was unopened; I would come back when I was through with Oswald to write down the label info and check it for fingerprints. Likewise the letter opener, which looked like an authentic Woolworth's. I checked the desk drawers and found them empty. Why a letter opener and *nary* a letter in sight?

I pointed at the foreign cereal box. "What's this?"

Oswald gave a nervous giggle. "Tsigan chow. He brought a lot with him. Say, we're not going to have to call in the city cops, are we?"

"Don't know yet," I grunted. "First let's find out if it's murder." And how, I wondered, do our laws apply if it is?

I walked over to take a look at the corpse—and felt a shiver run up my own spine when I noticed the straight-edged object sticking out of the dead alien's mouth. After a moment's incredulous hesitation, I slipped on a disposable rubber glove and drew it out just enough to confirm that it was indeed a perfectly ordinary Visa card.

I pushed it back in, hoping George and Oswald hadn't noticed. That card took a big bite out of my hopes that this was a natural death. It looked too much like the sort of "calling card" that deranged killers often leave to sign their work.

I turned to George. "Looks like you're going to have to give me a key after all. I'm going to have to come back and go over things carefully. Meanwhile, no one is to touch anything, or even come in here without me." Then, to Oswald, "Okay, let's go talk about that autopsy."

"Why don't we use my office?" he suggested. "It's debugged."

I couldn't resist grinning. "You mean it only has *your* bugs. Thanks, but I think we'll use mine."

My office used to be a broom closet, but it's home. I leaned forward across the desk toward Oswald, who was obviously less comfortable in such modest quarters. "So, now, why is it going to be so awkward to get a Tsigan doctor to come look at a dead Tsigan?"

"Maybe I'd better start at the beginning." He seemed to be avoiding my eyes. "You know how the Tsigan suddenly showed up at the UN last summer and said they'd been watching us for a long time. You know how they said they could see the future, and started proving it by making public predictions and letting us watch them come true."

Of course I knew, but I listened anyway. That whole business had made me uncomfortable from the start. The accuracy of their predictions could be unnerving, but it could also be very appealing to all those human sheep wanting to be led. And when the Tsigan started hinting that they'd be glad to advise us in all our affairs . . .

Don't get off on that now, I scolded myself. Pay attention!

"Naturally," Oswald was saying, "we at KKT&P watched all that with great interest. We thought it would be a great thing for a stockbrokerage to have somebody with that gift working for us. We thought it was just a daydream, of course. The Tsigan were

obviously dealing with humans only through the UN. How could any private company hope to get into the act?

"Then one day Azuk—the one who died—showed up on our doorstep asking us to take him in. Said he wasn't happy among his own people, and in return for asylum he'd watch the future markets for us and make us rich.

"We thought it over good and hard. It seemed risky, but awfully tempting. Finally we decided we couldn't pass it up. After all, the stuff we'd been reading in the papers proved they really *could* see the future, and there wasn't anything in our laws to forbid it—not yet, anyway. So we hired him, rented a room in your hotel, and had it outfitted to keep him comfortable. The staff was sworn to secrecy, and he never had to enter or leave. What's one more employee telecommuting, these days?"

"What, indeed? I notice, Mr. Oswald, you keep talking about 'we.' Who, precisely, is 'we'?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Who made these decisions? Who else knew Azuk was here?"

"Uh . . . nobody, actually. As CEO, I have a discretionary budget and a good deal of autonomy. He came directly to me, and while I quickly decided he could be a great benefit to the company, it seemed equally clear that the fewer people who knew about him, the better. Even the hotel knew only that the company was renting a room and wanted it specially modified and everyone kept out of it."

"Hm," said I. "Then I take it you have no idea who might have wanted to kill him, or why?"

"None whatever," said Oswald, but he looked nervous and evasive. Then he sighed and said, "No, wait. It's a long shot, but there was somebody in last night, right at quitting time. A rather well-known somebody who came in acting like a lunatic."

"What did he do?"

"He was ranting and raving and practically demanding that we sell off all our stock in Outward Bound Space Systems." Oswald laughed nervously. "Perhaps you heard about that on the morning news. We just bought that stock yesterday morning, on Azuk's advice. It was his first day on the job, you see—"

"Exactly what was his job?"

"We put him in charge of some mutual funds and told him to look at near-future stock reports and tell us what was going to go way up real fast. In his first hour he bought an enormous amount

of Outward Bound—made something of a stir because it's quite unusual for a mutual fund to acquire a controlling interest in one company. But two hours after that, it was announced that a dynamite invention that had been tied up in litigation for years was suddenly free for Outward Bound to develop. By four P.M. their stock had skyrocketed. Needless to say, we were thrilled."

"Needless to say. And this visitor you had, I take it, was not. Did he have some connection with the invention?"

"None that I know of. But I gather he had inside information that led him to anticipate the court decision we took advantage of. Evidently he was planning to do what we did, but we beat him to it. Now he was trying to tell me I'd better sell it to him, at a price well below the new market value, because it was sure to go down even faster than it had gone up. 'What happened today was a fluke,' he said, 'and if you wait till the markets open tomorrow, you'll take a terrible loss.' I asked him, 'Now how do you know that?' He turned beet red and said, 'How did *you* know it was going to shoot up? I can only think of one way. You must have a tame Tsigan.'

"And then he was out of there. Well, that made me plenty nervous because of course we *did* have Azuk and I was the only one supposed to know. I wasn't sure if this guy was just spouting words out of anger, but it scared me to think that he might really know."

"I can imagine. And I suppose even without Azuk, you can predict my next question, Mr. Oswald. Who was this visitor?"

Oswald waited three beats, then said, "Ronald Klaren."

So Ron Klaren was a suspect. Everyone knew who he was, too: a flamboyant entrepreneur with a habit of playing tight margins and overextending himself to the point where one big deal like this that went the wrong way could ruin him. Yes, he could be *very* upset. If he seriously suspected that Oswald had been getting tips from a Tsigan soothsayer—or worthsayer—he would not let it drop until he had checked it out and looked Real Hard for a way to exploit it. And with his influence and contacts, he very likely could.

Of course, I could not rule out Oswald himself, either. Even though Azuk was a goose with a proven record of golden eggs, he was not one Oswald could exploit indefinitely. Having made one big killing, Oswald just might have decided that the sooner and more permanently he got rid of this embarrassingly shady contact, the better.

In any case, my first orders of business were to go over that

creepy room with a fine-toothed comb, get the lab working on fingerprints and any other tidbits I found there, and take a closer look at that credit card and try to trace it. And, of course, to get a Tsigan medic over here to examine the body ASAP.

Setting those processes in motion took two easy phone calls and one hard one. The hard one, of course, was to get through several layers of security to talk to a leader of the Tsigan delegation. But the expected resistance dissipated dramatically when I said the words "dead Tsigan"—though I had no doubt that everything I said or heard after that was quite thoroughly bugged.

The Tsigan medic arrived just as I was finishing up my scrutiny of the crime scene, having already sent some goodies to the lab. The smell in there was pretty potent by then.

I'd never seen a live one in the flesh before. His skin had a kind of iridescence to it that the dead one lacked. His name was Iqaln. It was no surprise that he was accompanied by a couple of UN security guards. No doubt the death of an alien "off campus" during the first negotiations with extraterrestrials made them exceedingly nervous.

Dr. Iqaln bent over the body and made passes over it with some sort of scanner, occasionally muttering something quiet and unintelligible. It went on for quite a while, but I was relieved to see that it apparently wasn't going to involve any cutting.

Presently I asked him, "Can I ask you questions while you work?"

"Yes." His English sounded a bit like a trained parrot.

I pointed at the champagne bottle. "Do you know what that is?" Iqaln nodded quite humanly, but silently. "Could Azuk have used it?"

"The bottle, perhaps. The contents, no."

"The information I need from you is quite simple, doctor. Did Azuk die of natural causes, or was he killed?"

"Could be either," said Iqaln, finally laying his scanner aside and standing upright to face me. "The facial expression and the human artifact in his mouth do suggest something out of the ordinary. However, there is no evidence of gross trauma or poisoning—though there is some deep central nervous system damage."

I found that intriguing, but the interview on the whole frustrating. Much of my work consists of watching people and judging their credibility, but I couldn't read a live alien's face any better than a

dead one's. "If he was killed," I asked, "how was that nerve damage caused?"

Despite what I'd just been thinking, it seemed to me that the question bothered him. "Uh," he said, "under some conditions we Tsigant can . . . uh . . . remotely stimulate each other's nervous systems."

Great, I thought. Not only precognition, but telekinesis and maybe telepathy, too. Aloud, I said only, "Are you suggesting that Azuk was killed by one of his own kind?"

I was sure that one made him uncomfortable. "Why would you say that?"

"Think," I said. "If he was killed, it was evidently done by a method which the Tsigant can do, but humans can't. So I ask you: did any Tsigant have a motive to do it?"

"Uh . . . I know of none . . . but I am not qualified or permitted to discuss any aspect of the case except the medical. I have done that. If you wish to ask more questions of Tsigant, you will have to speak to my superiors."

"Okay," I said. "Just one more question. How long has he been dead?"

The doc seemed relieved to be back on his own turf. "Since early this morning—approximately six A.M."

I was in no hurry to talk to Iqaln's higher-ups. The more I learned about the Tsigant, the more uncomfortable they made me. But I'd keep it in mind as something I might have to do later.

Meanwhile, I had other things to do. With the Tsigant's permission, George and I moved the body (minus credit card) to another room and stored it on ice. I was the tiniest bit queasy about having not yet said anything to the city police, but a lot of the legalities of this case had no clear precedents and I was following the terms of my license to the letter.

The crime scene didn't feel quite so spooky with Azuk out of there, and felt a lot better with the "air conditioning" turned off. With some relief, I made a couple of phone calls to follow up my lab and credit card investigations. I'd found no clear traces of human presence except some fingerprints on the champagne bottle. Thanks to a youthful indiscretion involving a fraternity project to relocate a phone booth, Ron Klaren's prints were on file, and they did match.

So Klaren had gone to see Azuk, though the lab said he hadn't

touched the bottle since several hours before Azuk's death. He could have stayed after putting the bottle down, with care to avoid touching anything else—but why? And how could a human cause the kind of damage Dr. Iqaln had reported?

Getting nowhere with that, I called the credit card company. I'd already known that the card was eight months expired; what was more surprising was that the company had no record of either its number or the name to which it was issued.

What good was an expired credit card in a nonexistent name that matched no account on the company's books?

Another dead end, or so it seemed at the moment. And it was getting late.

I made one more visit to the scene of the crime, stopping on the way to pick up my "clues" from the lab so I could put them back where I'd found them. I was hoping vaguely for inspiration, but all I saw was a too-familiar pattern of mocking nonsense. The only thing that had changed was that the bed was now empty, still rumpled and unmade, with "J. Abraham Washton's" Visa card resting forlornly on the pillow.

I was tired, and glumly convinced that I would have to try to talk to other Tsigant—tomorrow. There was just one more thing I wanted to try tonight.

Ron Klaren didn't want to see me, but his blockers couldn't argue with my private police credentials. I found him in a plush den decorated with antiques and trophy heads of animals, several of them recently extinct. Up close, at ten P.M., he didn't look quite as cosmetically perfect as the public is used to seeing him, but he still looked quite suave and commanding with his boyish face, sleek silver hair, and gold brocade smoking jacket.

He offered me a sherry, but I declined. "I appreciate it, Mr. Klaren, but I don't think either of us wants this to take any longer than it must. I'll come right to the point: there's been a death, possibly a murder, and your fingerprints were found on a bottle left in the deceased's room last night. Can you explain what you were doing there?"

He set the sherry bottle aside with a sigh, but kept his own drink, lowered himself into a recliner, and took a sip before answering. "I give lots of people gifts, often in bottles. Maybe you'd better tell me who this unfortunate was."

"I think you know, Mr. Klaren. Or are many of your business associates Tsigant?"

He put down his glass, steepled his fingers, and frowned almost imperceptibly. "Okay, I guess there's no point in beating around the bush. You're saying that KKT&P's Tsigan fortuneteller was killed?"

"Possibly; even that's not certain, but it looks very likely. And you're a leading suspect, since we know you went to see him shortly before he died. We also know about your earlier conversation with Charles Oswald."

Klaren smiled sardonically. "Yes. Hardly a cooperative chap. Okay, I suppose Oswald told you I was unhappy because they made a killing—no pun intended—I'd counted on making myself. I tried to talk him into undoing the damage, but he wouldn't budge. He became nasty, actually. The more I thought about it, the less likely it seemed that they could have been sure enough to sink that much of a mutual fund into one company unless they were getting help from somebody who could literally see the future. I don't know anybody who can do that except the Tsigant. Oswald didn't respond to my accusation, but I became convinced it had to be that."

"So I started checking. Yes, I know it's not easy for ordinary mortals to get close to our alien visitors, but I hardly think it immodest if I point out that I'm not an ordinary mortal. I have contacts, Mr. Parvenza. I use them. I found out about this runaway alien who was working for Oswald, and I found out where he was, and I went to see him."

"What time was that?"

"Oh, I'd say elevenish. And I assure you that this Azuk character was just as stubborn as his boss—and just as much alive when I left him an hour or so later."

"You say he was stubborn. What were you hoping to get from him?"

"Why, what I couldn't get from Oswald, of course. A second chance to get what I'd been aiming at for so long. If I couldn't persuade Oswald to unload that stock, maybe I could get his tame Tsigan to tell him things that would scare him into it."

"You wanted Azuk to lie about the future," I said. "And you hoped to bribe him to do that with a bottle of champagne?"

"Oh, of course not! I didn't know what it would take; I didn't even know if he could metabolize the stuff. But I did figure it would make a good host gift to break the ice. If he knew enough about

our culture to make hundreds of millions per hour in the stock market, surely he'd know enough to recognize a good will gift." He laughed shortly. "Turns out he took it, even though he couldn't drink alcohol—seems he collects alien bottles. But he wouldn't consider doing what I asked."

I got no more out of Klaren, and left dissatisfied. His story seemed consistent with everything else I had, little as that was, and I still didn't see how he could have done the physical deed—or how a precognitive victim could have let him. But his motive was so obvious I couldn't get him out of my mind.

Early the next morning, after too little sleep, I again called the UN and arranged to talk to one Diilang, who I gathered was the leader of the Tsigan delegation to Earth. An hour later I was doing so—not face to face, but across a CCTV link from another room somewhere in the UN building. "I assume you already know about the death of one of your delegates in the hotel where I work," I said. "I'm investigating because we're afraid someone may have killed him."

"You mean Azuk," said Diilang, who looked to me much like Iqaln but had more rumble in his squawk-talk. "Why do you suspect this thing?"

"Well, for one thing, he had a counterfeit human credit card stuck in his mouth, which seemed most unusual." Was that a flicker of reaction on Diilang's face? "Also, your medical expert, Iqaln, examined the body and said that Azuk's facial expression suggested that something unusual had happened in his last moments. He also said he found no physical damage—*except* some internal and potentially lethal damage to his nervous system. A kind of damage which, as I understand Iqaln, no human could cause, but a Tsigan could."

He certainly showed a reaction that time. Too bad I couldn't read it. He almost hissed, "Surely you don't think we—"

"Oh, not as a matter of official policy," I assured him, as casually as if I actually believed it. "But how did you and his other compatriots feel about Azuk?"

A pause so long it just had to mean something. Then, with what sure sounded like sullenness, "That's of concern to us alone."

"Maybe so," I said, "but the suspicion of murder casts doubt on the whole human-Tsigan relationship. You've spent a couple of months here building up our trust in you, dazzling us with your

ability to foretell the future, holding out the promise of a mutually beneficial arrangement between our species. If our people suddenly get the impression that some of you disagree with others so much that they run off and hide, and then you kill to silence them . . . It's not going to help, sir."

Again a long silence. "I repeat, sir, that the details of Azuk's relationship with his fellows are no concern of yours. I can tell you, however, that he was a malcontent, and he did disappear." Pause. "What bothered us most about his association with the human financial firm was the impropriety of his independently offering special aid to a particular human group while the rest of us were trying to work for the benefit of your species as a whole."

Yeah, I thought with heavy irony. I said, "So it might have been convenient for you to be rid of him."

"Perhaps," said Diilang. "But we would hardly need to kill him. It would be quite sufficient to send him lies about the future that would discredit him with his human employer."

"Perhaps," I echoed. "But suppose whoever killed Azuk was acting on his own rather than for your government. Might he, for instance, have had a coconspirator? Someone who planned to desert with him, changed his mind, and then wanted to cover his complicity?"

"I tell you again, that's our concern, not yours."

"Of course. My apologies for an inappropriate question. But perhaps you could tell me this. Iqaln said one Tsigan could damage another's nervous system by remote control. Exactly how is that done?"

"That's hardly the sort of information we'd wish to share with humans," Diilang said stiffly. "But I do find it interesting that you're the second human who's asked us that question in the last day."

I found that interesting, too. "Who was the first?"

"He called himself Ronald Klaren. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

"Certainly. If you'll answer just one more question—"

"I've lost patience with you," said Diilang. "No more questions today."

He reached forward. My screen went blank and my speaker silent.

So Klaren had also been to see Diilang. That strengthened his standing as a suspect. The very fact that he had gotten through to

the alien leader proved that he had unusual connections—which was hardly surprising.

Perhaps, after giving up on both Oswald and Azuk, Klaren had been trying to feel out a weakness—to learn a way to kill a precognitive alien.

Or maybe it wasn't a simple murder. If Klaren had learned that only Tsigant could do that nerve trick, and if he too suspected there was a coconspirator, he might have tried to find and hire that individual to do the actual deed. . . .

It seemed like more of a lead than I'd found so far, but it still didn't take me very far. I switched off my monitor to get some quiet, leaned back in my chair, and closed my eyes. I tried to empty my conscious mind, to make it receptive to anything my subconscious might choose to dump into it. Words started flitting across from ear to ear. At first most of them had to do with the case, and then I started free-associating, which sometimes helped. Empty desk . . . precognitive corpse . . . letter opener . . . let 'er rip . . . ripped a seam . . . things are seldom what they . . .

My eyes snapped open and I sat bolt upright. The few things I'd found at the scene seemed utterly irrelevant to it—if they were really what they seemed.

But what if they weren't?

I stood up and charged out into the nippy fall drizzle to grab a taxi. Twenty minutes later I'd gathered all the "clues" from Room 333 at the Fritz and lugged them back to the lab. "Analyze these as thoroughly but nondestructively as you can," I told the dropoff clerk. "And fast. I have to know if they're really what they look like."

She looked skeptically at the expired credit card, the cheap letter opener, and the expensive bottle, and shrugged. "Whatever you say, Mr. Parvenza."

The lab called back within the hour. It was Anitra, a very good tech whose friendship and confidence I'd cultivated over the years, and she sounded baffled. "The champagne appears to be just what the label says," she said. "Good stuff—if you need any help drinking it when this is all over, let me know. But that other stuff . . . I've never seen anything like it. The credit card and letter opener are both full of hidden structure that looks vaguely like microchips. We did the credit card first, so that didn't surprise us *too* much. Most credit cards are smart these

days. But when we looked closer, none of it looked quite right. And the letter opener has it, too. Who ever heard of a Woolworth letter opener full of exotic microcircuits?"

"I thought you might find something like that," I grinned. "Any idea what the circuits do?"

"None whatever," she said. "We're not even sure they're really circuits. Do you have any ideas?"

"I might. Maybe we can talk about them later over that champagne. Right now I've got work to do. Thanks ever so much, Anitra."

I hung up before she could press me for details. Truth was, my idea was still pretty vague. But I really did have the feeling things were starting to fall into place.

I suddenly remembered something Diilang had said during our interview that hadn't fully registered at the time, and my heart and brain sped up even more. I grabbed the phone and called him back. It didn't take quite as much bullying this time.

Somewhat to my surprise, I got him to talk to me on the regular phone, which saved me a trip to the UN. The only disadvantage was that he was a good deal harder to understand without visual cues. (I suppose he thought the same about me.) "When Ronald Klaren visited you," I began, "and asked how your remote control works, did he ask anything else?"

"I don't understand," said Diilang—stiffly, I thought.

"I need to know," I told him. "One thing we can't understand about this case is how someone with precognition could let himself be killed. Why wouldn't he foresee it and take measures to prevent it?"

There was a long silence. Then Diilang said, "Please stop bothering me," and hung up.

I didn't bother trying to call him back. The very fact that he cut me off without answering strengthened my conviction that the question was very important.

And I had a half-baked idea *why* it was important. The Tsigan doctor had said they could kill by remote control, and the Tsigan leader hadn't denied it. He had also mentioned (in what I now suspected was a slip of his alien tongue) that they could send—or at least fake—a message from the future.

Suppose that was the *only* way they could get information from the future!

All us humans, myself included, had been making a big assump-

tion ever since the Tsigant showed up. They said they had precognition, and they proved it by making lots of predictions. They were never wrong—but what about all the things they didn't predict that happened anyway? We just assumed that the entire future was an open book to them; nobody thought to ask how their precognition *worked* or what its limitations were. Which made their offer to tell us everything we should do from here on out all too tempting to a lot of people.

Which was, I suspected, exactly what the Tsigant wanted. If you had the run of the galaxy, and you came upon a sometimes-warlike race that was about to burst forth into your domain, wouldn't you like a way to control that race's future development?

What if their "omniscience" was really just a straightforward application of an impressive, but limited, technology? What if all they knew about the future was what their future selves told them via some sort of "time telephone"? What if it was difficult or expensive to send those messages, so they couldn't send very many?

They could create the impression of knowing far more than they did, just by showing off a few laboriously arranged demonstrations. And maybe those messages themselves could be dangerous—especially if they interfaced directly with the recipient's nervous system.

Sound familiar?

So far all my evidence had said that Azuk was dead, but nobody had been in his apartment at the right time to do the damage. Well, maybe the explanation was very simple: they hadn't.

Maybe the murderer didn't even have a motive—yet.

Maybe, crazy as it sounded, he could still be stopped. . . .

A day and a half hiding out in Room 333 was beginning to get on my nerves. It might not even be the right place, I thought, and I had only a vague idea when the time would be. I had so little to go on. It could be any time, any place.

But that was too big a field to stake out, and I did have reasons to suspect *this* time and place. If my telephone theory was right, there ought to be a receiver and a transmitter. Since Azuk was spending all his time in this room, he had to be collecting his "future" data and sending it to his "past" self right here. So where were the transmitter and receiver?

I sure hadn't found anything that looked like I'd expect them to. So they had to be disguised as something else. That made sense;

Azuk would be just as eager as his compatriots to be thought of as having a mysterious gift for seeing the future rather than a black box that could do a few tricks. So I'd had the letter opener and Visa card checked out, and the lab report suggested I'd struck paydirt. One of them, evidently, was the transmitter and the other the receiver.

Who ever said a time machine had to be *big*?

Which was which? Well, if my hunch was right, he'd sent stock data back to something which fed it directly into his nervous system. Maybe not directly; maybe he had some sort of implant in the roof of his mouth that Iqaln had chosen not to tell me about. Feed the wrong kind of signal to that something and it might make his nervous system do things it shouldn't—maybe even fry the neurons themselves. The receiver must be the one that he had in his mouth when he died, because that was how the lethal signal from the future—from *now*—got into his nervous system.

So the Visa card was the receiver. It was not just a "calling card"; it was the business end of the weapon. Whoever came up with the scheme had an admirable eye for detail. A smart credit card would normally have things in it that looked sort of like the timephone's works, and an *expired* card would be less likely to invite close examination.

I hoped, though I didn't know, that the transmitter and receiver would be a matched pair so it would be difficult or impossible to send a killer signal to Azuk's receiver without using his own transmitter. So I guessed they would most likely come here to do it—and since there'd be no advantage in waiting, they'd do it soon.

So I'd put everything (except Azuk) back where I'd found it, and settled in to wait. And after a day and a half, I was beginning to wonder if I was on a completely wrong track.

Even on stakeout, one has to go to the bathroom. When I was coming back, it finally happened. I heard the outer door opening, ducked behind a smelly alien plant, and froze, pistol ready, heart pounding.

The door opened slowly and a Tsigan, one I hadn't seen before, slunk into the room. He too was holding something that I suspected was a weapon. Did he know I was here, or did he think Azuk was in the bathroom and might come out too soon? If he was trying to kill him, he must not know he was already dead.

One thing bothered me: if he thought Azuk was alive and on the

premises, why not just shoot him here and now? Why bother with what I thought he was going to do—what he *must* be going to do, since Azuk's death proved the deed accomplished?

And what would happen if I stopped him?

I tried not to think about that. I'd read enough science fiction to give up on making sense of temporal paradoxes, and this was no time to get sidetracked into thinking about them again.

My suspect looked around, seemed to relax a little, and stepped to the computer. He didn't sit down, but he did pick up the letter opener—the thing I'd guessed was the transmitter—and slipped it deftly into what looked like one of the ventilation slots on the computer. He looked around once more, then laid his "gun" down and poised his hands over the keyboard.

"Stop!" I yelled, charging out of my hiding place. "You're under arrest!" I had no idea whether such an arrest would hold up in court, but there was no time to think about that, either.

The Tsigan turned his head but didn't move his hands from the keyboard. He started to type. . . .

I had to do something fast. I was willing to try arresting an alien, but shooting him seemed *too* risky. In the split second of my hesitation, he took one hand from the keyboard—but kept typing, hunt-and-peck, with the other—and reached for his weapon. My reflexes realized I was within reach of the champagne bottle; I grabbed it and in one swift movement cracked it over his head. Bubbly pressure released explosively, showering everything in sight with champagne and shards of glass.

He staggered back, apparently not seriously hurt, but bleeding, just as I was, from several small cuts. His blood was a bright Christmassy green that made a nice contrast to my red.

"You idiot!" he squawked. "You've probably killed him!"

Only then did I see the champagne dripping from the computer—and letter opener—and remember the sparks it had triggered when it hit, which had not registered consciously until now. With a precipitously sinking feeling, I realized what he must mean.

And at that instant the outer door opened again to admit my old friends from UN Security, with sidearms drawn.

"I'm afraid," one of them said, "you're both going to have to come with us."

It's quite a blow to a detective's ego to find out that he did it. There was a big meeting after that, with both UN and Tsigan

leaders, in which they admitted that I was right about how their precognition worked, including the roles of the letter opener and credit card. I'd picked that up from Diilang's remark about messages; unfortunately, I hadn't picked up on the part about "we wouldn't have to kill him."

A lot of secrets came out now because the human leaders had suddenly developed a healthy fear of the pig in that poke. The Tsigan I'd tried to stop from sending a destructive message back to kill Azuk in the past wasn't doing any such thing. He was my counterpart: the detective they'd turned loose to track down Azuk when he disappeared. He'd been working pretty much on his own and hadn't checked in with headquarters as often as he should have. He didn't know about either Klaren's or my visit to Diilang, or that Azuk was already dead. But he did see the same news that had driven Klaren into a frenzy and used that to figure out where Azuk was and what he was doing. He had independently reached the same conclusion that Diilang had let slip to me, that Azuk could be rendered harmless to Tsigan goals by sending him phony messages that would make him the laughingstock of KKT&P. *That's* what he was trying to do when I clobbered him.

But the shower of champagne had shorted out all manner of things in the computer and time transmitter, and that's what zapped poor Azuk. So I was, however unwittingly, the killer—or at least the weapon. Since the lethal impulse was sent back through time, what looked like a "whodunit" had really been a "who-will-do-it."

I feel terrible about my role in it, but both the UN and the Tsigan are letting me off. Everybody's willing to accept what happened as an accident, and the Tsigan have had to back off quite a bit in their pressure to take over our affairs. Now that we know they don't really know as much about the future as they wanted us to believe, their "guidance" is a lot easier to resist. The UN has ordered them off Earth, on pain of destruction of their fleet (yes, we could do it), and we're back to trying to make it on our own, without soothsayers. Or worthsayers.

But we've got a new incentive to do it really well. We know they're out there, and while they're not everything we thought they were, they're not to be trifled with.

And someday, I suspect, they'll be back.

A Lesson in Murder

by Richard Hardwick

Gladys Parker wore a pink dress and a little hat that was pinned to her blonde hair and her glasses were still in place, even though she was floating face up and was quite dead.

"I could tell she was dead," the young manager of the Brookdale Community Club swimming pool was saying to one of the two uniformed policemen who answered the call. "I figured I better call the cops before I touched anything."

"You got a bathing suit on. Think you could get her over here to the edge of the pool?" the officer said.

The young man looked out at the floating body and nodded. "I guess so."

He waded out waist-deep and gingerly pushed the body to the edge, where the two policemen hauled it out, dripping, and stretched it out on the concrete parapet.

"There's something else there," the young man said. He waded back out, ducked under the surface, and returned to the poolside with a dark handbag. "It was on the bottom."

One officer opened it, drained the water out, and took out a billfold. He glanced through a few sodden identification cards. "Her name was Gladys Parker. Lived over on Huntington." He turned to the pool manager. "Did you know her? Was she a member of the pool?"

The young man shook his head. "I never saw her before. Huntington's a pretty good ways off for our members, anyhow. Clear across town."

"How do you suppose she got in with the gate locked?"

The young man pointed across the pool. "There's a hole over there some kids cut in the fence. The committee hasn't got around to fixing it yet. I guess that's where she got in."

"Hey, Jim," the second officer said. "Take a look here at her throat. See them marks?"

The first officer knelt beside his partner and looked at the smooth flesh of the woman's throat. After a few seconds he said, "Get back to the car and call in. Tell 'em to get somebody from Homicide over here."

Lieutenant George Jernigan was in the squad room when

the call came in. He was standing at the third floor window staring down at the Sunday vacant street, and he was idly wondering about the motivation of crusaders. Why, he rhetorically asked himself, couldn't everyone adjust to reality. Why didn't they see that a man had to live, that he had to put something aside for his retirement, that it was not necessarily evil intent or greed or dishonesty that prompted underpaid civil servants to take a little extra when and where they could find it.

"A body just turned up, lieutenant," said Detective Ed Marvin. The young man looked down at the memo slip in his hand. "A woman, a Gladys Parker, was found in the swimming pool of the Brookdale Community Club. The boys who answered the call said she looked like she might have been strangled."

"Let's see that," Jernigan said, taking the slip from Marvin. He looked at the penciled name for a moment and rubbed his chin. "I know a girl named Gladys Parker."

"We better get a move on," said Marvin.

Marvin drove, using the siren sparingly because traffic was light and Sunday school was in session. They reached the oak-shaded street in the

quiet suburban neighborhood and pulled to a stop behind the black and white patrol car.

"Morning, Lieutenant Jernigan," the uniformed officer greeted them. "The body's down there by the swimming pool. The meat wagon's on the way."

"Who found it?" asked Jernigan.

"A kid named Latham. He's the manager here. He was opening for the day, and he spotted her floating out there in the middle of the pool."

Jernigan led the way down the curving stone steps from the street level and through the open gate in the steel fence. The three men stopped beside the woman's body.

"Is that the Gladys Parker you knew, lieutenant?" said Marvin.

Jernigan nodded, looking down at the bluish marks about the young woman's throat.

"Here's her handbag," said the second uniformed officer.

Marvin took it and carefully went through the contents. Among the effects was seventy-eight dollars in small bills. A gold ring was in the bottom of the bag. "Doesn't seem to have been robbery. Who was she, lieutenant?"

"Gladys was a small time blackmailer, among other things. She was also a source of

information to me."

"One of your stoolies, huh?"

Up on the street the police ambulance pulled to the curb, the red blinker atop it flashing. The two attendants got out and came down the steps carrying a wheeled stretcher between them.

Jernigan slowly rose from squatting beside the body, feeling the protest of his leg muscles. He looked again at the dead woman. She couldn't have been more than thirty, but she had packed a lot of living into those years. He shook his head, not philosophically but resignedly, as a man does who has come to accept almost everything as being inevitable. Then he turned and went to question Latham, the manager of the pool.

"Jernigan," said Captain Johannsen, walking around from behind his desk and pausing at the window with his hands clasped behind him. "You know as well as I do that this damned grand jury investigation of the department is going to stir up a commotion that will be far out of proportion to anything they might turn up. There's nothing we can do about that." The captain turned from the window and looked at Jernigan. "Good publicity is the only weapon we can fight it with. A

good press right now would be one hell of a help. How does this Parker case look? Have you got any lead on it?"

Jernigan stubbed out his cigarette in the desk ashtray. "I knew the woman. She dabbled in blackmail, and that's always a risky business. She was indicted a few years back on a blackmail charge but the charge was dropped before it came to trial."

"Then it could have been somebody she had the hook in," suggested the captain.

"I've got my feelers out. Maybe something will turn up."

"I want you to concentrate on this one, Jernigan. I want you on it full time, and you can have Marvin or anybody else to give you a hand. I want this one cracked and cracked fast. A murder case, particularly one involving a woman, always sells a lot of newspapers, and we'd get quite a boost from that direction if this one was wrapped up quick."

"All right, captain. I'll keep Marvin on it with me. He's new and he's eager. Sometimes that pays off."

"I'll look for a report every day on this one, direct to me."

Jernigan went from Captain Johannsen's office to the squad room. Detective Ed Marvin was at a desk, a dogeared file before

him. "That the Parker package?" Jernigan asked.

Marvin nodded. "You were right, lieutenant. She was a blackmailer, and apparently a damned slippery one. How do you go about finding out who someone was blackmailing? We searched her apartment and came up with nothing."

"How'd we get into her apartment?"

"How'd we get in?" the young detective said. "Whatdya mean?"

"I mean *how*. There was a door, and it was locked. Who opened it?"

"The apartment super—say! I see what you mean. There was no key in her purse."

Jernigan sat down and pulled the file to him.

Marvin went on. "Then the murderer probably took the key and went there after he killed her. If there was anything pointing to him, he got rid of it."

"Has the medical report come in yet?" asked Jernigan.

"Right there under the folder. Looks like the killer tried to strangle her, then hit her on the head with something blunt. She was apparently unconscious when she was put in the pool. She died by drowning."

"The captain's hot on this one," Jernigan said. "He wants

action, and he wants it right now."

"That grand jury business?"

"That's right."

"Do you think there's corruption in the department, lieutenant?"

"The department is made up of human beings. Underpaid human beings." Jernigan pulled an ashtray toward him and lighted a cigarette.

"So we all get the name 'crooked cop' because of one or two, is that it?"

"I know how you feel, son. I used to feel that way myself."

"You *used to*?"

"Until I realized I couldn't change the world, that there wasn't one damned thing I could do about it. And also until I realized that people have short memories. So-called police corruption is just another form of sensationalism, and as soon as it gets out of the headlines everybody forgets all about it."

"That sounds a little cynical," Marvin said. He looked carefully at his superior and he wasn't sure he liked Jernigan.

"Maybe," Jernigan said. "If being practical is cynical, then I've got it."

The squad room phone jingled, and Marvin answered it. He spoke briefly, then held the instrument out. "Call's for you, lieutenant."

Jernigan pushed the medical report aside and took the phone. "Lieutenant Jernigan," he said. He listened for half a minute, wrote something on a memo pad, and said, "If you pick up anything else, get in touch." Then he hung up.

Marvin looked at him expectantly. But for a long while Jernigan stared down at the pad before him on the desk, then he slowly shook his head.

"What is it?" said Marvin.

"It might be a lead on the Parker case. And then again it just might be a hot potato, a helluva hot potato."

"Yeah?" Marvin perched on the corner of the desk and waited.

"Have you ever heard of a fellow by the name of George Webster?"

Marvin touched a thumbnail to his lips. "It rings a bell . . ." He snapped his fingers. "Webster! Isn't he the guy that's heading up the Citizens' Committee? The guy who's so hot on having the department investigated?"

"That's the one."

"Well, what about him?"

"He's had a couple of meetings with Gladys Parker lately."

Marvin stared. "You mean she was putting the bite on him? George Webster?"

Jernigan got up and went to

the window. He watched the cars moving along the street. People on the move, going places. Not many of them knew where they were going, or why. They just went, and most of them minded their own business along the way. Why was it some of them had this urge to come poking their noses into places that didn't concern them? Your nose could get caught . . .

"You think she was?" said Marvin.

Jernigan raised his eyes and watched a jet liner climbing over the city, the engines pouring black smoke. "At least it's worth checking out."

"How about your tip, are you sure it was on the level?"

"As sure as I am of any of them," said Jernigan. He went to the water cooler and filled a paper cup. He came back to the desk, took a vial from the middle drawer, shook out two capsules, and swallowed them with the water.

"What'll we do?" said Marvin. "If we start questioning Webster, all hell will break loose."

"Are you saying we can't bring in a man because he's heading up a Citizens' Committee?" Jernigan smiled vaguely. "The law's supposed to be the same for everybody."

"Sure, lieutenant, but . . ."

"I know what you mean, son. I was just trying to pull your leg."

Marvin threw out his hands. "You know what it'll look like. If we can't nail him and nail him good, he'll say it was just a smear campaign. Besides, what the devil is the word of one of your stoolies to that of a man like Webster?"

Youth and reason. The boy would make a good cop in time. Jernigan crumpled the paper cup and sent it spinning into the wire waste basket.

"The captain didn't tell me where to draw the line, Marvin. He just said crack it."

Detective Ed Marvin started to say something, then turned away and drew a hand across his forehead. He whirled and knuckled down on the desk. "Look, lieutenant. I've just been out of uniform for a little over three months. The department is my career, my life, and I'm just starting. I don't want something to screw it up now. I—"

Jernigan interrupted. "What you're trying to say is a lot simpler than that. You're saying you're afraid to tackle a man like Webster."

"All right, lieutenant! Have it your way! But you've put your time in, in five or six years you get your pension and head for Florida—"

"Four and a half years," said Jernigan, pulling the package on Gladys Parker across the desk. *And I don't want anything to happen to that either, my wise young friend,* he thought.

"Can I get off the case?" Marvin said flatly.

Jernigan raised his eyes and looked squarely at Detective Marvin. "No," he said simply.

Captain Johannsen was nervous. Jernigan could tell that by his superior's mannerisms, the way the cigar shifted from one side of his mouth to the other. He'd had essentially the same feelings as Marvin about bringing in George Webster for questioning. And yet there had been little alternative. Jernigan had checked out the tip and found witnesses to the meeting of George Webster and Gladys Parker.

The captain moved to his office window, his hands busy grasping each other behind his back. He turned reluctantly to face the man in the expensive business suit.

"Mr. Webster, two days ago a woman's body was found in a swimming pool on the north side of town. You may have read the accounts in the newspapers. The woman's name was Gladys Parker." The captain came back to his desk and sat

down. This was hard going for him. It always was.

Jernigan moved to the side of the desk and looked with deceptively mild eyes at George Webster. "Did you know Gladys Parker?"

"Did I—" For a moment the man was startled. He recouped quickly. "I read that the woman was a blackmailer, perhaps worse. Why would I know her?"

Jernigan's gaze remained on Webster's face. "We have information that you met with Gladys Parker on two separate occasions within the past ten days. There are witnesses to these meetings, Mr. Webster. I feel I should tell you that before you make any further denial of knowing Gladys Parker. These witnesses will swear in court—"

"All right. I did know her. But there was no personal connection. I was—" He looked quickly to Captain Johannsen and back to Jernigan. "I was looking for information that might be of value to the grand jury. Oh, I know what you're thinking, Lieutenant Jernigan. You're thinking that I've seen too many private eye shows and that I should leave the investigating to those who know about such things. Well, if it weren't for us nosy amateurs, the professionals would cut

City Hall up and cart it away."

"Is that an accusation, Mr. Webster?" prodded Jernigan. "If it is, then maybe you'd like to make a statement to the newspapers, and perhaps you'd also like to back it up with a little proof."

"That's enough, Jernigan," said Johannsen. He turned his attention to George Webster. "Frankly, Mr. Webster, I was somewhat surprised when your name came up in connection with this case. It was . . . untimely."

"Where were you Saturday night, Mr. Webster?" asked Jernigan.

"At home, as usual. Alone." He whirled on Johannsen. "Captain, if you think I don't see through this little game then you're a very naive man. It's the old shell game. You try to draw attention away from what's really going on. If you can discredit me, even by implication, then you think the investigation of the police department will lose steam. I'm no fool. I am a reputable businessman, not a . . . a . . ."

"Not a stupid cop, Mr. Webster?" said Jernigan with exaggerated patience. "Mr. Webster, I've been on the police force of this city for thirty-eight years. I've got four and a half years to go to retirement. In my time I've seen more than a few

so-called citizens' committees come barging in here with a big broom, yelling corruption at the top of their lungs. And I've seen these same self-righteous individuals go sneaking to this or that judge or police captain or lieutenant wanting to get a lousy parking ticket fixed, or trying to get Junior off on a speeding charge, or worse. It's been my unfortunate experience that almost all these high type citizens somehow consider themselves above this same law that they are so hell-bent on straightening out. And you, Mr. Webster, are no exception in my opinion."

"*I don't have to stand for this!*" George Webster exploded, springing up from his chair.

"Please sit down, Mr. Webster," said the captain. He glared at Jernigan. "The lieutenant has been working hard on the Parker case. I think perhaps he's tired."

"You're right, captain," said Jernigan. "I am tired. I'm bone tired. I'd like to leave if I may."

Johannsen, with obvious relief, nodded.

Behind him, as he closed the door, Jernigan heard the captain's voice as he began his effort to close the breach that had been opened.

"How'd it go?" asked Marvin.

"It surprises Webster how us 'crook cops' have time between shakedown to find out things about him."

"You don't think much of this grand jury thing, do you?"

"I've seen them before. They screw up the routine. It takes time to get things rolling again."

Marvin nodded. "Maybe it's only intended as a control. You know, just to sort of let everybody know that people are interested in how their tax money is spent."

Jernigan sighed. "Then why the hell don't they spend their time checking on paving contracts, or purchasing, or—" He swiveled around in his chair and picked up a pencil from the desktop. "Four and a half years and they can have it. They can have the whole damned mess. Right now we've got us a murder case to work on."

Marvin pulled a chair to the desk.

"Where do we go from here? This George Webster character is the only lead we've got so far."

"Until I hear different, that's the lead we follow."

"You're sticking your neck out, lieutenant. You could get your head chopped off."

Jernigan shook a cigarette from his pack and looked at Marvin over the flame of a

match. "It's been swung at before."

In his small apartment that evening, Lieutenant Jernigan had two drinks before preparing himself a frozen dinner. Usually, he limited himself to one drink, but tonight something was on his mind. There was a decision he had to make, and it was not at all the sort of thing he liked to do. It seemed that lately there had been a lot of decisions.

He finished his dinner and methodically cleaned up the small kitchenette; then he went to the desk in the living room and opened the center drawer. He looked through the papers there and withdrew a letter that had been written in green ink. This he carefully read, and when he was done he snipped away portions with a pair of nail scissors, charred the entire edge of the paper with a match flame, and put the letter in his pocket. He sat for several minutes, staring into space. Then he sighed and got up wearily and went to the hi-fi. He took the *Eroica* from its jacket, placed it on the turntable, and sat down in his sagging easy chair. He closed his eyes, and a slow smile came to his face, as if a great weight had been lifted off him.

"You think you're on the

right track in this thing, Jernigan?" Captain Johannsen said.

"You know as much as I do, sir. I've always counted on my contacts, and ninety percent of the time it's paid off to some extent."

"And this latest tip is that you might turn up evidence in the Parker case if you search George Webster's home, is that it?"

Jernigan nodded.

The captain shook his head and resumed his pacing over a section of carpet that had obviously participated in many a thorny decision. "I don't know. If this thing backfired . . ." He stopped pacing and looked at Jernigan. "How reliable is this source of yours?"

Jernigan shrugged. "They don't have credentials or give guarantees. In fact, this particular bit of advice happens to be from an anonymous source."

"Anonymous! Are you out of your mind, Jernigan!"

"The record speaks for itself, captain."

"Well," Johannsen conceded, "it's a fact that you've got more and better underworld contacts than any other man on the force. If it was somebody else who turned this up, I think I'd squash it before it got off the ground. But you . . ." The captain began his walk again.

"Webster's out of town for a

couple of days. This would be a good time to make the search."

Johannsen sighed. "Why can't things be simple. A lousy blackmailer gets herself knocked off, and who turns out to be our one and only suspect? Just the head of the Citizens' Committee."

"I remember a sweet little grandmother who murdered four people with a butcher knife. She was so sweet she even took her knitting to death row and knitted the executioner a pair of argyle socks. You can't put murderers in a category."

"Save your object lessons for Detective Marvin," the captain said sourly.

"You want this case wrapped up," said Jernigan. "This could do it."

"What did this tipster of yours say to look for at Webster's?"

"He didn't say."

"It could be a trap. George Webster didn't like our bringing him in here, he didn't like it one damned bit. And your little extemporaneous lecture went over with him like a lead balloon. This thing could be a plan to get my scalp."

"And mine," Jernigan added. "If you say so, I'll go out on the limb by myself. I can wait till you're off duty and get the warrant on my own."

Johannsen shook his head, as Jernigan knew he would. "If we pull this, we pull it together." He looked again at his subordinate. "Do you really think this might be something?"

"I say let's get a warrant and find out."

"But Webster's *position*—"

"If a man hasn't got position, if he hasn't got something to lose, he's not worth the time of day to a blackmailer."

Captain Johannsen sighed heavily, realizing the battle was lost. "Get your damned warrant," he said.

"Some joint, huh?" Detective Marvin said nervously as he stood on the porch of the house with Lieutenant Jernigan and waited for someone to answer his ring.

"Shows you what you might have ended up with if you hadn't decided to be a cop," said Jernigan.

"Yeah," said Marvin, shifting his feet.

The wide white door opened and a middle-aged woman in a pale green uniform said, "Yes?"

Jernigan flashed his badge. "Police," he said. "We've got a search warrant."

The woman looked puzzled. "Mr. Webster isn't here. Could you come back tomorrow?"

"No, ma'am," said Jernigan,

stepping through the door and past the woman. "Take the upstairs, Marvin—"

"Wait a minute..." the woman objected. "You can't do this... Mr. Webster..."

"We can do this, lady. This piece of paper says so. Now, you just go back to your kitchen or get on with whatever you were doing."

"But... the police..." Her hands worked nervously.

"We *are* the police, miss," said Jernigan. "Take the upstairs, Marvin. I'll check down here."

"What should I look for?"

"How the hell should I know. Just get busy."

Marvin went up the curving staircase two steps at a time. The housekeeper moved uncertainly back to the sanctuary of the kitchen, and Jernigan busied himself by beginning his search in the library.

Forty-five minutes later Jernigan paused at the foot of the staircase. "Marvin?" he called. "How you coming up there?"

"Nothing yet, lieutenant. I've got one more room to check."

Jernigan grunted and went into the kitchen. The woman sat at a white work table and stared at him. He went past her and out into the back yard.

Five minutes later, when Marvin came down the stairs, Jernigan was in the living

room looking through the volumes of a small bookcase recessed into the wall beside the fireplace.

The young detective shook his head. "It looks like a wild goose chase to me. There wasn't anything up there. If I knew what to look for—"

"Check outside," said Jernigan. "Check real good."

Marvin went out, and Jernigan sat down and took out his pack of cigarettes. A small pile of butts had built up in the brass ashtray, and Jernigan got up and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. The housekeeper had disappeared, and the sound of a washing machine came from an adjoining utility room.

Marvin came running in from outside, a broad grin on his face. "Lieutenant! Take a look at this!" He held out a partially charred piece of white paper. "I found it in the incinerator. It would have burned except that somebody probably crammed too much paper in and the fire was smothered."

He cleared his throat and held the paper out and started to read:

"George,

You won't talk to me on the phone, so I'm writing you. I know you think I won't do it, but I will.

Don't kid yourself. If I haven't heard from you by Saturday, then I'm going to—

Here, a portion of the letter was burned away, and then it continued, partway through a sentence.

...it will ruin you and I'm sure you don't want that. Remember, Saturday, and you better have the money with you. You know I don't joke about something this important.
Gladys"

Marvin's grin returned. "That ought to sew it up. She was blackmailing him, and there's the ultimatum right

there. Whaddya think?"

"I'd say it doesn't look too good for Mr. Webster."

Lieutenant George Jernigan turned away to the kitchen window. By the strong sunlight he saw the long smudge of black along the side of his hand, and he held out the hand and turned on the tap, washing away all trace of the soot.

He looked out the window at the patio and the barbecue grill, and he thought, That guy could have saved himself a hell of a lot of trouble if he had held up his lousy crusade for four and a half more years. . . .

Then he turned to Detective Marvin. "Nice work, son. Now, let's get back to the office. I want to get off these feet for awhile."

Little Miracles

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

We found the cat just as we were about to seal off the house. Its throat had been slit, and its coat was matted with blood. Some instinct made me crouch down to touch it. Its skin was warm, and its body struggled with shallow breaths. Life among the carnage.

I snapped my fingers for the paramedics. They glanced at each other and didn't move.

"Gentlemen, kindly get your asses over here," I said.

"But, sir, it's a cat."

"And it's still breathing. Get over here."

They crouched over the cat, placed a bandage over its neck, and did something to ease its breathing. I directed them to a veterinarian down the street, then returned my attention to the bloodbath before me. In the kitchen, a woman's body, curled in a fetal hug, clutching a knife in what appeared to have been self-defense. In the bedroom, two children, slaughtered. And in the master bathroom, a man collapsed over the bathtub, also dead. In the living room, the TV stand was

empty. The door to the empty stereo cabinet in the dining room stood open, and pictures were missing from the walls.

It looked like a desperate act of a startled burglar. But the cat was the clue. Sliced on the way out for the sheer pleasure of the act. Cats don't bark. They don't threaten killers. Cats hide from frightening circumstances. The killer flushed the cat and slit its throat just to see the blood.

Wrote up the preliminary report and went home, washed the blood-stink off my skin. It was raining. Felt like it was always raining. Oregon: land of the nonexistent sun.

The house was a mess—dishes in the sink, dirty clothes tumbling out of the closet. No time to clean, not even now, with another crazy on the loose. I opened the fridge, searching for a beer, and heard Delilah's voice: *I don't know how you can come home and assume you lead a normal life, as if nothing happened to you all day.* In the early days, she had liked that,



"HEAR YOU MISSED SOME THINGS AT THE TORGENSEN HOUSE."

the way I could leave my job behind me. But she never could. She always wanted to know the details, relishing the jargon as if it was a new language. *Was there high velocity blood?* she would have asked about this case.

All over the house, I would have replied. Especially the bathroom and the kitchen. The man must have gone first, but the woman put up quite a fight.

I would never have told her about the blood's odd trajectory, indicating that the killer used a sharp weapon, knife perhaps, but not a normal kitchen knife. I would never have trusted her that far.

I closed the refrigerator door without the beer. I never did leave the work at the office. It was always there, one corner of the brain assessing the evidence, searching for the clue that would lead us to the creep of the week. Maybe that was why Delilah left. Maybe her words had always been sarcasm, her questions medicine to draw out the poison.

Grabbed the car keys and let myself out the back door. The car, the only thing she left me, a 1988 Saab, drove itself. We stopped in the slanted parking lot at the vet's, a place I hadn't been since her dog nearly died chewing a steak bone. Pulled open the door, stepped into the

scent of disinfectant, matted fur, and frightened animals. The woman behind the reception desk didn't recognize me, which was fine, since I didn't remember seeing her before.

I flashed my badge. "Some of my paramedics brought a cat in earlier."

She shuddered delicately. Just once, but enough for me to notice. "What an awful thing to do to an animal," she said.

You should have seen what happened to the people, I nearly said, but since the paramedics had followed procedure and not said anything, I wouldn't either. "I was wondering if you folks had ever seen the cat before."

"I haven't, but let me check with the doctor." She got up, a tidy woman in a green dress, her age nearly impossible to determine. I glanced around the room. Empty now, but I had seen it filled with worried people hovering over their animals as if the animals were as precious as children. Something in the back set off the dogs, and one of them howled, followed by another. She returned with the vet, the man I remembered, a big-boned redhead with a touch that even the most skittish animal trusted.

"Frank," he said, and held out a well-scrubbed hand. I shook it.

"Doug." We have never socialized, only saw each other in this small building, but the familiarity put me at ease when I hadn't even realized I was uncomfortable. "Ever see the cat before?"

"No," the vet said. "And he's got distinctive markings. I would have remembered."

"Family named Torgenson, lived just down the block. Ever treat their animals?"

He nodded, looking thoughtful, too polite to ask why Torgenson. "They had a dog, died of old age about a month ago. He always brought the dog in. She was allergic to cats. They both came to put the dog down, and she was a mess by the time they left even though we keep this place as dander-free as modern technology allows."

The news startled me. The cat had been found beside her.

"He's awake. Want to see him?"

It took me a moment to realize that the vet was talking about the cat. "Sure," I said, feeling more than a bit uncomfortable. I'd lived through this scene a number of times in hospitals, seeing the survivor, asking preliminary questions. But I couldn't ask the cat why he'd been there, what he'd seen.

The vet led me through the narrow hallway into a large room filled with steel tables. In

the back, rows of cages lined the walls. Cats, in various stages of distress, stared at me. I didn't see any dogs, figured they must be kept elsewhere.

The vet showed me a cage on the far side of the wall. A white cat with an orange mustache stared at us through the mesh. His eyes were still wide with the effect of the drug. A gauze bandage had been taped in place around his neck. He saw me and rolled on his back, paws kneading the empty air.

"Amazing, huh?" the vet said. "I've never seen such a friendly cat. Especially one dragged and wounded."

"He'll live?"

"He probably used up eight of his nine lives, but yeah, he'll make it." The vet opened the door, reached in, and scratched the cat's stomach. "What do you plan to do with him?"

I hadn't realized I had given the cat any thought. "Take him home," I said.

The station was a dingy gray. The walls were made of steel and concrete, built during the Vietnam era when everything had to be bombproof. The ventilation was poor, and the place smelled of old cigarettes, stale coffee, and sweat. My desk was the only spotless one among the detectives, mostly because I shoved everything in drawers.

When I arrived the morning after the killings, though, files were piled five inches high on the top.

I sat down and sorted through them. Autopsies, blood analyses, request forms for DNA scans, forensics results, photos of the house's contents... amazing how much reading could be generated in one night. I pulled out the autopsy reports and the photographs of the crime scene.

All night I had been thinking about the cat. Hell, I even stopped at the grocery store and bought litter, a litter pan, and food dishes. The vet said he would give me food when Rip—that's what they were calling the little guy—was ready to go home.

But that wasn't all I was thinking about. I was thinking about the kind of person who would slit a cat's throat. I was thinking about the woman dead on the kitchen floor. I was thinking about the knife in her hand.

It would have been easy enough for her to surprise her husband in the bathroom. A bit of a struggle and he would be down, then attack the sleeping children. In the kitchen, a quick slash across the throat of a stray cat, and then the final act—a knife to her own gut, enough times to bleed to death.

A domestic tragedy, something I had seen so often that it no longer turned my stomach. The papers would play it up, and the D.A.'s office would look into her life just enough to give her a motive before the case closed completely.

I pulled out the pictures, studied them, realized my theory was wrong. No wounds on Mrs. Torgenson's chest, face, or neck. All in the back. She had been stabbed in the back, surprised in her own kitchen, knife in hand. Not self-defense as I had earlier thought. Surprised chopping an onion for the family dinner.

And Rip, blood matted on his fur, running down his front as it should in a neck wound, but no pool beneath his body. Blood on his back, his tail, his ears. Someone else's blood. I picked up the pictures, turned them. Handprints. He had been moved.

I set the photos down, put my face in my hands. Amazing the details I had missed. I used to approach a crime scene as if it were a complete jigsaw puzzle. All the clues were there; I just had to notice them and arrange them in the correct order. That way each detail went into the brain, from the day-old cigarette stub on the driveway to the pattern of the bloodstains on the wall. In those days, I

would have seen the onions on the sideboard, noticed her shredded back, commented on the handprints covering Rip.

Ceramic clanged against the metal surface of my desk, and the aroma of fresh coffee hit me. "Breakfast, Frank?"

Denny, one of the few men who have been in the station as long as I have. Fifteen years sounds like a long time, but I could remember the days when we were enthusiastic about our work, when we concentrated on catching the creeps and then having a few brews after a rough day. We hadn't spent time together in I couldn't remember how long.

I brought my hands down casually, as if I had been resting my eyes instead of berating myself. He had put a cup of coffee on one of my files. I took it, sipped.

"Tough case, huh?" He half-sat, half-leaned on my desk. "I hate seeing kids sliced up like that."

I stared at him, seeing instead the little girl clutching her stuffed bunny, eyes still closed as if she were asleep. Her older sister, eyes wide with terror . . .

Rip had bothered me more than they had. But Rip had been the anomaly at the crime scene.

"Yeah," I said.

Denny looked at me strangely. Once he pulled me off a perp who'd been caught molesting a five-year-old girl. The murder case I'd busted my ass working on because I knew the mother had tried to strangle her daughters and I didn't want her to regain custody of them.

"You okay?" he asked.

"No different than I've been."

He nodded once, as if my comment ended the conversation, and disappeared around the corner to his own desk. When Delilah left, he invited me over for dinner for weeks until it became clear that I would never go. I didn't want to see him and Sheila, perfect examples of conjugal bliss. I didn't want to socialize with anyone.

I sighed, pulled out my legal pad. Options: The killer was (1) someone they knew; (2) some sicko creep just starting; (3) some sicko creep with a pattern; (4) a burglar, caught in the act; (5) a family member.

I pushed the list aside, filled out the DNA forms, sent a notice of the killing across the wire to see if anyone else picked up a pattern. Then I read the files, crossed off the family member—since, with that bloodbath, the entire family died—and assigned one of my men to monitor the fences

in town. I was preparing a list of interviews when McRooney stopped.

"Frank, my office."

I set my pen down and followed him through the maze of desks to the only walled-off office in the place. McRooney had a large glass door through which he saw damn near everything. Fake plants hung from the fluorescents, and filing cabinets stood like soldiers behind his desk.

He pulled the blinds on the door.

"Sit," he said.

I did as I was told. McRooney was an okay guy—political, ambitious, people-savvy. I remember when he was a green kid, puking at the scene of his first murder. Long time ago.

"Hear you missed some things at the Torgenson house."

"Too damn much," I said. No use lying to the man. He knew.

"Crime lab boys caught some of it. Forensics more. You're usually ahead of the game, Frank."

"I know," I said.

"You've been slipping these past six months. You didn't take time when the wife left. You need to."

"When the case is wrapped."

"Now." McRooney sat behind his desk, looking like a politician in a thirties movie. "I'm

going to reassign. This kind of thing is too important."

"To trust to a guy who's screwing up."

"Your words, Frank." He pulled out a sheet of paper, stamped it, and slid it toward me. "A leave with pay. As much time as you need. Your heart's gone."

I ignored the paper. "I'll just sit at home and get sloshed. Gimme a week. If I haven't got the case wrapped by then, I'll go."

"It'll be cold then."

"If I continue to screw up, you mean?"

"You never used to be so defensive." He leaned back in his chair. It groaned under his weight.

"I never used to notice my own mistakes, either." I sighed, adjusted my trouser legs. "I don't think staying home is the way for me. I got a glimmer in this case, first interest I've felt in a while. Let me try."

He pulled the paper back, looked at it, crumpled it. Missed the hook shot to the garbage can. "Three days. That way we don't lose too much ground."

Three days. As if he expected nothing from my work. I stood. I wouldn't expect much from my work, either. I grabbed the doorknob.

"Frank?"

Stopped, waited, head down, not turning.

"Is she worth all this?"

Friend. The comment of a concerned friend. I let my breath out slowly, feeling truth come with it. "I don't think it's her. I think it's been building for a long time. Her going was just a symptom."

"Studen is a good shrink."

Flush rose on my cheeks—anger canceling truth. "You gave me three days," I said, and let myself out.

Not so much as a half-formed fingerprint by five. Neighbors heard nothing. No, the family was quiet, kept to themselves. Dog was loud, but it died months ago.

Called the vet. Rip was doing better. Could go home in a few days. Quite the survivor, huh?, a comment I took to mean that the vet had seen the papers, understood what happened to the cat.

A little miracle, I replied as I hung up.

Closed the files, went down to the Steelhead for a beer and a burger. The inside was crowded, but not too, just enough so that I had to take a table instead of a booth. Three screens played the news, and the music blared country-western, unusual for a yuppie bar. Glanced at the menu, glanced

at the microbrews being sipped at the tables around me. Three days. And day one nearly gone.

When the waitress showed, I ordered a bacon-cheddar burger, fries, and a coffee nudge without the nudge. I'd get more work done with caffeine as the drug of choice.

Woman sat across from me, alone. Blonde, leggy, nail polish and lip gloss. Not usually my type. She smiled, I smiled back, and it felt good. But the burger arrived before I could pick myself up and sit beside her. Then the boyfriend showed, three-piece suit and silk tie, and I leaned back, out-classed.

Not that I was too disappointed. I'd picked up too many women in that bar, both before and after Delilah, never for conversation, always for exercise and sometimes not enough of that. Couldn't imagine bringing a woman to my place now, with its ancient dishes and unwashed sheets. Guess it had been a long time. I did the laundry just after Delilah left, months ago.

The burger settled me, the coffee buzzed me. I wandered back to the station, half wishing the cat had died so we could have sent his body to the lab to check for prints. Uncharitable thought—remembering the little guy on his back, trusting

paws kneading the air, the cat box at the house, waiting. We'd had cats at home, barn cats who sat on my shoulders while I milked the cows at five in the morning. Two cats, both killed one morning when they got loose in the cow pen. I cried until my momma shamed me.

Men don't cry, she said. They get mad.

Yeah, Momma, I thought. What happens when the anger goes, too, and you're just a big hulking shell?

She would have no answer for that. I squinted, wondered when we last spoke. Wasn't even sure if I'd told her Delilah was gone.

Opened the door to the station, stepped into the familiar noise and stink. Place never changed, day to night, always busy, always crazy. Problems everywhere, even in a small city like this one.

Three new files on my desk: fax-sent cases, one from Washington, one from California, one from Utah. Sat down and read. Perp never caught. One scene left a dog, thought to be a stray, throat slit. Another a cat, belonged to the neighbors, throat slit. Yet another cat, black, purchased from a pet store, throat slit.

California, skipped Nevada, Utah, skipped Idaho, Washington, and now Oregon. New pat-

tern? Or getting sloppy? Hard to tell with a random crazy.

I put my head on my desk. A random crazy. The worst kind.

Typed up a new report, flagged it for McRooney, and reminded him to notify the FBI. The case was theirs now, not that I couldn't work on it, too.

On the drive home, found myself wondering what the crazy would think if he knew the cat lived. First survivor. The thought gave me a pang, made me half-swerve to head for the vet's, then forced myself to continue the drive home. Silly idea. The cat was safe. As if it mattered.

Opened the door, turned on the lights, blared Tchaikovsky on the CD and dug into the dishes. Grunge work for relaxation. Had to get the case out of my mind. The best detecting happened in the subconscious—comparing details, fitting pieces. The subconscious still worked, I knew that. The path to the conscious was blocked. I'd seen everything at the murder site but couldn't remember it until something jogged me. Not good. Not good at all.

Left the dishes to soak, went into the living room, and flopped on the couch. Closed my eyes and walked through the

Torgenson house again.

First thing: stale-death reek of blood, even before we walked through the door. Into the sunken living room, done in modular white, with chrome lamps, decorative books. An unused room. And nothing, except a little mud leading up the stairs. Half-moon pattern. Man's shoe.

Den. Sloppy with toys, half read books, another stereo still there. Television cabinet empty, VCR gone. No evidence of search, of a mess other than the intentional one.

Into the formal dining. Stereo cabinet door open, equipment gone. Nothing else touched. No prints on the cabinet glass.

Kitchen. Blood-spattered. Woman on her side, fetal position, knife in her hand. Onions chopped on the sideboard, eggs unbeaten in a mixing bowl, meat burned on the stove. The smell of hamburger mixed with fresh blood. Cat left like a calling card beside the back door. Blood pattern on the carpeted steps—dripping blood, spatters on the rug, not the wall.

Follow the stairs twisting to the second story. No handprints, no marks at all on the white walls. Odd for people with children. Fresh paint?

Blood trail leads to the bathroom. Man doubled over the

tub, throat slit, blood-pouring down the drain. (Drain cleaned? Something else hiding in there? Some missing evidence?) High velocity blood patterned on the mirror around the sink and onto the toilet. Why couldn't he see perp in mirror? Mirror has unusually high placement. Perp too short? Or too quick? With throat slit, man unable to scream. First victim, then. The children might have screamed, at least the second girl. Woman didn't hear—why?

Back to the kitchen, searching, searching, realized the answer in the dining room, now missing. Stereo probably blaring. How, then, could the children sleep? And why was she cooking?

Onions, hamburger, eggs on the sideboard. She was making breakfast.

Back up stairs. Master bedroom, again in white. King-sized bed, made army style—by him, retired colonel, probably his last act. More decorative books in wall cases. Television propped near headboard. Another VCR, more movies. Didn't have to look to guess the kind. Television still there, as is VCR. Half-moon footprints leading to the bathroom, mud plus blood leading out. Confirmed: killer stopped here first. Knew the morning routine well

enough to avoid the woman, get the man, the children, and finally her in the kitchen, alone and terrified.

Followed prints to the girls' room. Took the youngest first, nearest the door. Quick slash, throat again, killed her before she could wake. Blood trickles off the bed onto the floor. No prints. Went around to kill her sister. Awake, eyes open, body curled. Sister tried to escape, got caught in the man's arms, watched him kill her. . . .

Opened my eyes, took a deep sigh, body shaking. Relieved to be in my own living room, *Marche Slav* repeating over and over on the CD. Picked up the remote and shut the music off, deciding silence was more amenable than the noise.

He arrived early morning, interrupted the routine, just as he had in the other states. They thought he was a nighttime killer, but he wasn't. He had a set time for attack, and a set plan, and he carried it through. Letting Rip live was no accident. He was trying to get caught. Each set of deaths more dangerous than the last, as if he were searching for the final adrenaline rush, the final opportunity . . .

I leaned over the couch's arm, picked up the phone, and ordered the forensics squad to return to the house, check the

drain, the prints. Hung up and remembered the details from the other reports. Each place he had taken something large, something different. Microwave from California, computer from Utah, china and silver in Washington. He wasn't fencing, or even masquerading as a burglar. He was furnishing his home. Souvenirs.

And Rip. Not a calling card, but a clue. A stray dog, a neighbor's cat. Animals didn't belong to the perp, but were associated with him, somehow. A job, maybe, that took him into certain neighborhoods at particular times of the morning? Allowed him to travel, and to watch patterns. Not animal welfare. Those were city jobs, stable because they paid well, not likely to take a drifter. Vet? Perhaps, but again, stability was the key. Needing to build a practice, to get good references.

Vet. Finally the light bulb went off. I picked up the phone, called the station again, asked Vinnie to doublecheck the files. Yes, a vet close to each murdered family.

Thumbed through the phone book, found Doug the vet's home address, grabbed my coat and shield, and left. Ten o'clock might be too late to go visiting in some neighborhoods, but not in mine.

* * *

Took five minutes after I knocked for him to come to the door. Out of his smock, he looked younger—aided, I think, by his tousled hair. I half-expected a female voice to query, an admonition not to wake the kids. Instead got a shirtless, sleepy man clutching a beer, TV blaring in the background, cats emerging from all parts of the house, and a quiet dog padding its way to the door.

"Frank?" Doug—he didn't seem like a vet any more to me—ran his hand over his face. "You got a problem? There's an emergency vet on Walker."

"Need to talk to you about the Torgenson case. Got a minute?"

"Sure." Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, pushing back a cat with his foot.

"Come on in."

The place smelled like home. Unwashed dishes piled in the kitchen, blanket on the couch. He tossed a cat off the recliner, bade me sit, used the remote to shut off the TV. "Sorry about the mess. Wife left a few weeks ago, and I can't bring myself to clean."

Vets have lives, too. "It's been six months for me, and I've been thinking about hiring a service."

"Thing is," Doug said, settling on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, "I always

thought I did a lot of the chores."

I nodded. Recognition that my situation was not unique warmed me. "Sorry to bother you so late. Just need a few questions answered. You hire anyone new in the last few months?"

He shook his head. "I haven't hired anyone for two years. Got college kids cleaning the cages—they've been with me since they started school. One's a junior, the other'll graduate in spring. My receptionist has been there for nearly two years, and the lab techs since I started."

The air left me, as a feeling of failure grew. Somehow I'd assumed that his night attendants, cage cleaners, would be the ones. Transient, short-term jobs—

Then felt a flood of relief. If that were true, Rip would have died, the first night.

"Who else comes through?"

He closed his eyes. I liked his concentration. Most folks always wanted to know why I needed the information. "Medical supply people like any doctor's office, deliveries—"

"Any in the morning?"

"Cat food, sometimes, about once a month. Arrives seven A.M. sharp, and gets annoyed if no one's at the door to let him in. But he's not new, either.

Been servicing us as long as I can remember."

"But only once a month?"

"Sometimes not even that. Got quite a route. Heard him brag to Sally—that's my receptionist. He can cover six states in thirty days if he has to, although he runs Oregon, Nevada, usually, picking up supplies in California as he drives through."

"Don't like him much." No need to make that a question. I could feel the animosity in Doug's every word.

Doug opened his eyes, looked at me, hand on a black cat that decided to stare at me from his lap. "No, I don't. He's odd. Animals don't like him, but they come because he smells like food. Animals always know."

Strays. The neighbor's cat. Food.

"Remember his name?"

Doug gently eased the cat away, got up. "No, but I've got his card around here, somewhere, if I can find my wallet." He walked barefoot over to a desk mounded with open envelopes, pushed them aside, and picked up a leather wallet, thumbed through it, and produced a card. I took it. Black lettering on white.

Jonathan Kivy.

Had him.

I still sweated it. FBI wanted

to make the collar—allowed them to take him anywhere they needed to. They found him in Southern Oregon, TV, VCR, stereo, and paintings in the back of his truck, and radioed, promising to bring him in to me.

All night I'd dreamed about Rip walking up to him, trusting but nervous, hoping that a man who smelled like food would provide him with some. Saw the arm flash down, the quick throat slash, the one-handed bloody carry into the Torgensons' kitchen, dumped by the door like a single sack of cat food.

Woke up, tears on my cheeks, anger in my gut, repeating *it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter*. Remembered nights like that, Delilah's arms around me, soothing, dreams of dead children, bodies in the river, perps with guns, and perps with knives. She'd tell me it was over. I knew it would never be over, so all I could do was drown the tears, let the anger serve. Repeating *it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter*, until it didn't any more.

They showed up about eleven A.M., two men in black suits with regulation haircuts, leading a small man, hands in cuffs. I started shivering, anger running through my body, looking for an escape. One leap across

the desk, fingers against his throat, showing him how it felt to be small and helpless and dying . . .

But I didn't move. Clapsed my hands under my desktop, waited for them to stop. McRooney left his office, watched me. He said he'd abide by my decision.

They brought him to my desk. Stared at his hands, long slender fingers, strong. Pictured Rip in them, then the little girl, gripped by the hair, head pulled back—

It didn't matter.

But it did.

—throat slashed, one quick movement, her sister screaming. . . .

"He's yours, if you want him, detective," Adams, one of the FBI men, said. They had praised me the night before for saving them so much headache.

I looked at the perp's eyes. Cold, black, reflecting only my face. How close had I gotten to that empty stare?

"Extradite him. Utah. They have a death penalty there, and they're not afraid to use it. Tell them I'll cooperate in any way I can." The words came out angry, so forceful that I almost spit at him.

The perp's face didn't change. I didn't so much care about the death penalty as the trial. Oregon's prisons were over-

crowded, good reason, sometimes, to opt for an insanity defense. I didn't want the perp's abusive childhood—if he had one—or an anti-social personality disorder, which he did have, to get in the way of his punishment.

They led him into McRooney's office to prepare the paperwork, perhaps allow him a phone call. I leaned back, wondering why he did it, and then realizing that it didn't matter. He would have some reason, some crazy rationale, but it would just mask the compulsion. I read a lot on serial killers in the early days. Random crazies, triggered by an unknown mechanism. Human, but not human, threatening us all.

I stood up, staggered, with the force of released emotion. Denny stopped by my desk, concern on his face. "You okay?"

Reached up, found wet cheeks. Odd that the tears would come now. "Fine," I said.

McRooney had left his office, coming to pat me on the back. I didn't want him to touch me, didn't want anyone to touch me just then. I swallowed, made the lump disappear. "I'm going to take that leave," I said. "Starting now."

McRooney watched, slight frown on his face. To his credit,

he didn't comment on my appearance. "You deserve it, Frank. We'll set the details later. Good work on this."

"Thanks," I said. Grabbed my jacket, and half-ran from the station, knowing that on the leave, I would have to think about my future, too. Maybe homicide was no longer for me. Maybe being a cop was no longer for me.

The thought sobered the weird elation building in my gut. Doug said I could get Rip today, and I would. Funny. A cat started my emotional lockup, and a cat undid it. Because he was an anomaly, the only living thing I had not trained my emotions to hide from at a crime scene. I remembered him on his back, paws

kneading the air. Like a little child. Delilah used to say pets brought out the parenting instinct. Fine. I needed something to mother, to take the attention from myself.

I got in the car, wondering how Rip would like the drive. Wondering if I could clean the house in an afternoon. Wondering if Doug would drop by after work for a brew. A man without a wife, without conjugal bliss. We could complain about women, get royally sloshed, laugh and cry until we were sure the emotions ran both hot and cold.

Had to clear the icewater from my veins.

Whoa, body, heat wave moving in.

I shivered one last time.

The heat would feel good.

AT HOME WITH **Hitchcock**

Alfred Hitchcock's **HOME SWEET HOMICIDE**

STORIES FROM ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE



EDITED BY
**Cathleen
Jordan**

"[A] gripping collection."
— *Mystery News*

"Another great mystery
volume from Walker."
— *Reading for Pleasure* #20

Walker and Company
shatters the secure illusion of
home sweet home with twelve
superb tales of mystery and
murder.
The anthology stories range
from cozy to hard-boiled and
feature a murder for every
mystery lover.

5 1/2 x 8 1/2, 288 pages
0-8027-5798-7 cloth \$18.95

◆Lawrence Block◆Loren D. Estleman◆Joseph Hansen◆John Lutz◆
◆Charlotte MacLeod◆Ralph McInerney◆Patricia Moyes◆Marcia Muller◆
◆Nancy Pickard◆Herbert Resnicow◆John Suter◆Donald E. Westlake◆

WALKER AND COMPANY • 720 Fifth Avenue • New York, NY

Please send me _____ copies of *Alfred Hitchcock's Home Sweet Homicide*.
I enclose my check for \$ _____ (18.95 plus \$3.00 postage and handling for each
copy.) New York State and California residents must include sales tax.

Send Orders to:

Dept. 062
Alfred Hitchcock's
Mystery Magazine
380 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Name (print) _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip Code _____

The Roots of Death

by Margaret Maron

I was dawdling over a second cup of coffee, rereading Marcie's letter and despairing anew at today's mobility, which can put the width of a whole continent between a woman and her first grandchildren, when I noticed activity at the old Brockman house next door. I put down the letter.

The mock orange hedge that separates our two yards was too high for me to see the ground floor, but the shutters on a second floor window suddenly flew back, framing a young, very pretty girl with uptilted chin and sleek dark hair. Resting firm, capable hands on the windowsill to smile at someone below, she seemed so utterly, blissfully happy that I too smiled involuntarily. She saw me sitting in our sunny breakfast nook and threw a friendly disarming smile in my direction. I liked her at once.

People in the Brockman house again, and young people at that! I could hardly wait for Frank to come home that night to tell him the good news.

It had been a long, lonesome winter for me, with Marcie and

her husband transferred to a branch office in Oregon and Frank, Jr., away at college. Brampton is a small Southern town in the outermost suburbs of Washington, D. C., and doesn't offer too many diversions. Besides, I never was much for ladies' clubs, for listening to a flock of elderly hens cackle about their grandchildren or preen themselves on growing old gracefully.

"We should have had a dozen children," Frank often said that winter. "A natural-born mother like you misses having someone to cluck over."

Well, I *do* like young folks, and the next morning I made up a fresh batch of oatmeal cookies and stepped through a gap in the mock orange to ring their back bell.

Anne Jordan opened the door instantly. "I was just going to come borrow a cup of something and invite you over," she smiled, wiping dusty fingers on the seat of her blue stretch pants before taking the cookies. "Come on in and have some coffee."

I saw that my first impres-

sion across the widths of our yards had been deceiving. Her slender figure, good bones, and open smile had given an appearance of extreme youth, but up close, tiny lines around her wide gray eyes revealed that she was past thirty.

"I'm thirty-two," she told me that day, "and I feel like a nineteen-year-old bride. After twelve years of marriage, we finally have our first real home."

"Her husband was in the army," I told Frank at dinner, "and you know what that means: military housing, packing up and moving every time you've just got used to a place."

My younger brother Don, who teaches botany at the college here and lives in a neat bachelor apartment on campus, was over for dinner that night, and he grinned at my enthusiasm. "Sounds as if you've adopted her."

"Oh, you know Alicia," Frank teased. "All strays and orphans."

Although Anne *was* orphaned at an early age and shunted from one indifferent relative to another while growing up, she was by no means a stray. Her marriage to John Jordan was a rock upon which to anchor, and now that he had finally fulfilled the promise he'd made when they were first

married—the promise of permanency, a proper home, civilian life—she had fallen in love with him all over again.

"He never minded army life, but I hated it," Anne confided. "Most people got two- or three-year assignments to one spot, but our limit always seemed to be eighteen months. Once, in Germany, I planted rosebushes. I thought that even if I only saw them bloom one spring, it would be worth it. New orders came six months later for Japan. After that I just stuck to zinnias and petunias."

Standing at her kitchen window that first day in early spring, she gestured happily to the deep back yard and its long-neglected garden where a few scattered crocuses poked up through the dead grass. "I noticed a little nursery on the edge of town the other day. Do you suppose I could find a Dorothy Perkins rosebush there? It's an old fashioned Rambler. My grandmother had one."

All my frustrated maternalism went out to her, and after that I was over almost every day, lending a hand with painting cabinets, washing crystal from Germany, polishing brass trays from India, and helping Anne decide where all the accumulation of twelve years of travel could be positioned to best advantage through the

Victorian-sized Brockman house.

I remember her satisfaction as she stood a massive pair of heavy iron candlesticks on either side of the wide center staircase in the entrance hall.

"I bought them in Spain," she said. "I knew how perfect they would look someday in this exact position," and they were the right touch: thickly twining tendrils and grape leaves of black iron formed a stubby five inch diameter and stretched up nearly four feet from a heavy block base, enhancing the formal red and black wallpaper of the entrance hall. Her decorative sense was superb, and the Brockman place bloomed and took on new beauty under her sure touch.

"Don't forget I've had years to plan it," she said once, and showed me a thick looseleaf notebook bulging with ideas and pictures she'd clipped from a long line of homemaking magazines. "It's just as well John didn't resign his commission any sooner. Look how my taste ran in those early days. Ultra-super-modern. Ugh!"

I had a sudden heart-wrenching picture of a trickling stream of bright women's magazines following her around the world; of the days spent dreaming over, choosing and rejecting from, their shiny

pages. It was as if she had held her life suspended, refusing to become attached to any place or unmovable thing or person until now, when she could let herself begin to live.

Throughout the long slow spring, I showed her the town, introduced her to Mr. Higgins at the greenhouse, and rummaged with her in the second-hand shops where we found several lovely chests to refinish. It was like having Marcie back, furnishing her first home, all over again.

We saw little of John at first. He was a stocky, capable man, not quite six feet tall, with an aura of restless energy. He helped move the heavier furniture, then absented himself, relieved to escape the endless discussions of the best color for the den, of whether the dining room should be papered or the badly-scratched paneling replaced.

He told Anne cheerfully, "Two things: stay inside our budget and no pink ruffles in the den."

As he left for Washington one day, he said to me, "It's wonderful of you to take her under your wing. She's needed a friend for a long time, and I'm afraid I just can't work up much interest in interior decorating." He smiled at Anne, happily engrossed with fabric swatches. "I

haven't seen her so excited since we were married."

"Darling," Anne said, holding out two pieces of fabric, "do you think the federalist blue or—"

"Ask Alicia," he protested and blew her a kiss. "I'm off to my office. I didn't know civilians worked so hard!"

John had found an excellent job in Washington as personnel manager of a small but growing paper products firm. It had recently merged with a larger business, and John had been brought in as a neutral outsider to smooth over the merger and effect a friction-free working relationship between the two groups of employees. So far, he had managed to preserve his neutrality, but he was constantly being faced with complaints as old precedents and outmoded traditions were changed for progress' sake.

"I only hope it continues to be hectic for a good long time," Anne said. "At least until John gets used to the placidity of civilian life. He's always enjoyed settling flaps. That's why he made such a good administrator in the army." For a moment there was a shadow of apprehension in her voice. "I just hope he doesn't start missing it when the office settles down."

During April and May, John's office continued to de-

mand long hours, and Anne began to join us for bridge on Friday nights when Don was over for dinner, a regular habit with him. Yet it was understood that even if she held seven no-trump, doubled, redoubled and vulnerable, the moment John's car could be heard in the drive she would leave us, running across our back yard, cutting through the hedge to greet him.

Looking at the handful of face cards she had flung down one night, Don said wistfully, "It must be nice to have a wife who would leave a hand like that to welcome you home."

Frank and I looked at him in surprise. It was the first time we had ever heard him regret his choice of bachelorhood, and Frank chuckled, "Better take warning, Don. Another remark like that and Alicia'll have you marching down the aisle. Like tomorrow, possibly."

Frank was so close to the truth that I could feel myself blushing as I pushed down the mental list of eligible females that I'd been checking off. "It's no disgrace to want my brother happily married," I argued. "He's forty now. How's he going to feel at fifty, with no family to cherish and to be cherished by?"

"Lucky!" Don answered. "Admit it, my dear. How many women do you know like Anne

who are content to center their lives around making a home for their husbands?" And he cut the deck for three-handed rummy.

By June, the main improvements to the house were complete. There remained only the small additions and deletions of decor that would allow a dedicated homemaker a lifetime of happy puttering.

The yards and flower gardens were to have been John's project, but as the office yet demanded long hours, Anne tackled it under Don's supervision. Despite his lack of a garden of his own, Don has a bright green thumb and keeps our garden in a constant state of upheaval, shifting bulb beds and shrubs like a housewife rearranging furniture.

He often dropped in to help Anne repot the begonias into hanging baskets for the patio or to prune back an overgrown lilac, and he even found the exact rambling rosebush Anne had longed for. The exuberant hug she gave him in enthusiastic gratitude sent him stumbling through a border of sweet williams.

He and John devoted several Sundays to digging up young dogwood sprigs in the surrounding woods to transplant along their back fence. Anne had volunteered to help but

was instantly voted down by everyone, for by this time, her condition was decreed too delicate to allow unwarranted strain.

All of us were delighted at the prospect of a baby. Frank and I had hardly got used to the idea of grandchildren before Marcie and her family had moved so far away, and Don had already decided that he would plant a Japanese walnut in the back corner that fall. "It should be just right for easy climbing in five or six years," he declared.

John was happiest of all. He had wanted a child for years, but Anne had held back.

"How heavenly it sounds to say so confidently, 'In five or six years our child will be climbing a tree planted this fall,'" she glowed. "To know that he isn't going to be dragged all over the world, transferred from one school to another."

"For heaven's sake, Anne!" John exploded in exasperation. "You always make military life sound like existence in a concentration camp. What's so terrible about raising a child in the service? Think how much more sophisticated all the kids were that we knew, how quickly they learned a bit of foreign languages."

"A bit is right," Anne said hotly. "Kitchen vocabularies

learned from the maids they were constantly left with. No chance to form ties or build a feeling of belonging."

"But they learned to belong anywhere, honey. And most of them were as well adjusted as any kids in Brampton."

"And what of the ones who weren't, John? You can't have forgotten little Kevin Lentz, whose bedroom was over ours in Japan. The way he cried for hours every night."

"He was an emotionally disturbed child, and you can't know he wouldn't have been the same if his father had been an accountant in Brampton. Besides, it was his first move and he was just upset at leaving his dog behind. He's probably learned to adjust by now, just as our child—"

He laughed abruptly. "Look at us! Our first fight since we came to Brampton, and it has to be in front of Alicia and Frank." The talk moved lightly on to other subjects, and I was the only one who even noticed what John had almost said, though Anne's large gray eyes had been momentarily puzzled.

From that moment on, I began to distrust John vaguely, and once started, many small incidents seemed to take on uneasy significance. I noticed a restlessness about him, his lack of real interest in the house,

and one day in July, I heard him remark that with all the improvements they'd made, the house had easily doubled in value.

By late fall, the office merger had settled down into a smooth routine, and as John became a normal nine-to-fiver, a bored impatience seemed to grow in him.

Anne put it down to the adjustment to civilian life and prospective fatherhood, but I was not so sure, and early one November day when he came over to return a pair of pliers, my concern for Anne's happiness lost its discretion.

"John," I said hesitantly, "I know it's none of my business, but are you happy here in Brampton?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I suppose I'm as content here as I would be in any one place."

"But you don't like being in just one place forever?"

He sighed. "I wish Anne could see me as clearly as you do. She's so intoxicated with this house, this town, with you. Oh yes, most definitely with you," he repeated irritably, noting my look of surprise. "You're the closest thing to a mother she's ever known. She'll miss you the most."

"Miss me!" I exclaimed, aghast.

"Look, Alicia, I know I must

seem like a heel, but I've tried to live like Anne wants and I just can't. I said I would try civilian life and I have. That was our deal. But I see it just isn't my bag."

"But it's only been a few months," I protested.

"Months of knowing that I'll be doing the same thing for the rest of my life, the same job, the same place, the same people. No offense to you or even to this town, but in the service you have the adventure of never knowing where your next assignment is going to be. How much excitement do you think I can get out of watching leaves fall off the same tree year after year after year?"

"But Anne—"

"I know, but she's a good sport, and frankly I don't think she actually hated the army as much as she says now. I never heard her do much complaining before."

"Because she loved you," I pleaded; "because she knew you'd keep your promise and give her a home."

"But I have and I will. We can keep the house, rent it out during our overseas tours. We're bound to be stationed in Washington once in awhile if I request it. And even if we don't, she'll get over it."

"The way that child Kevin got over the loss of his dog?" I

asked him caustically.

"Now, Alicia," he said, grinning boyishly at me, but I was not about to be gotten around so easily.

"I think it was nasty of you to wait until she was pregnant at last."

"I didn't plan that, honest. But I won't pretend I'm sorry. I've wanted a son for years, but Anne would never agree to it before."

"When will you be leaving?" I asked bleakly, suddenly feeling older than my fifty-two years entitled me to feel.

"It's too soon to say. I've started the paperwork, but I don't know if they'll let me re-enter at my former rank. That's why I haven't told Anne yet."

"You needn't worry about my telling her," I assured him. "I couldn't bear it."

Anne's love and trust in John were painful to remember. In such a short time she had become a dearly-loved daughter to me and I cried as I thought of the baby I might never see, who would be born in some goodness-knows-where base hospital.

"It isn't fair," I raged that night to Frank as we lay in the darkness of our bedroom. "He talks of Anne's not understanding him and thinks that because he wants a thing, she will come to want it, too. And he's

wrong-wrong-wrong!"

Frank put a comforting arm around me. "You're getting too worked up, honey. You forget that she's his wife and not your daughter. Why, you didn't get this upset when Marcie moved to Oregon."

"Marcie was different. She was excited about going. Anne won't be."

"Maybe when the baby is born—"

"It will be worse. Oh, Frank," I sobbed, "I was so looking forward to that baby."

In the next few days, I found many reasons to be out of the house. I didn't want to see Anne's face, so full of luminous content, knowing what I did, but as I was leaving one morning, Anne intercepted me. With a child's anxious directness, she asked, "Have I done something, Alicia? You act as if you're avoiding me."

"Of course not, dear. I've been catching up on a lot of shopping. Thanksgiving sales, you know." But I had missed our long talks, and when she wistfully invited me to come in for coffee, I couldn't resist.

As we were entering the house, I saw Mr. McKeon, our mailman, trudging up my front walk. "You go ahead and pour," I called to Anne. "I want to see if there's a letter from Frank, Jr., or Marcie."

"Just a postcard from Frank, Jr.," Mr. McKeon greeted me. "He needs more money. Say, he sure does go through a lot."

I agreed that he did indeed. We're all so used to Mr. McKeon's reading any unsealed mail that no one bothers to get angry about it any more.

"If you're going back to Mrs. Jordan's, you can take her these and save me a few steps. Just bills and circulars and a letter from the army marked 'Official Business.'"

"They never stop." Anne smiled as she left the mail on a small hall table for John. "You wouldn't believe how endlessly the army tries to keep you involved. This one probably says, 'Are you sure you don't want to stay active by joining the reserve?'"

Yet the envelope filled me with apprehension. Its bulk was greater than that of a normal form letter, and I couldn't help wondering if this might be the last time I would see Anne so serenely happy.

As I drew the living room drapes that evening, I saw John drive in. He gave me a cheery wave, but I stared back coldly. That he could be so callous! Moving jerkily around our kitchen, slamming silverware on the table, pounding the veal as I would have enjoyed pounding John, I could imagine Anne

going through similar movements next door, graceful despite the eight-months' burden she carried within her. I could almost see her dashing upstairs for a quick dab of lipstick as she heard John's car, making herself pretty for an adored husband who was about to smash her ordered dreams.

Then Frank came home and I forced myself to push down the hatred I felt for John and the compassion for Anne, to make light conversation over our meal. Frank was fond of Anne, but old fashioned enough to hold that a wife's place was by her husband wherever he wanted to go, and that, after all, it was really none of my business. I was too depressed to court a lecture from him.

We were just beginning our dessert when I heard running footsteps across our back yard and Anne burst into the kitchen without knocking. Her voice was ragged and she gasped from the exertion.

"Alicia—Frank—you've got to help me. It's John. He—he slipped—he fell—on the stairs. I think he's dead."

She stumbled to a chair, crying wildly, as Frank sprang up and rushed out the door. Her gray eyes almost black, she clutched at my hand sobbing, "Please—*please* help me!"

Instantly my mind shot back

twenty years to the day a crash from the den brought me on the run to find Frank's most cherished possession—his great-grandfather's gold watch, which hung inside a bell-shaped glass—lying smashed on the hearth and a shaken six-year-old Marcie terrified by the enormity of her guilt. She had looked at me with the same expression as was now in Anne's eyes and whispered, "What will Daddy say? Mommy, please help me."

I hugged Anne briefly, fiercely. "Go lie down on the couch," I ordered. "You must think of the baby. I'll take care of everything," and I ran to follow Frank across the yard.

We found John at the foot of the wide staircase, his body twisted at a grotesque angle. His head lay against the foot of one of the heavy iron candlesticks and a small pool of blood had oozed out from the wound where he had struck.

Frank knelt briefly, listening for a pulse beat.

"Is he alive?" I whispered.

"Can't tell," he grunted, rising heavily. "If he is, it's just barely. Where's the phone? I'll call a doctor."

"In the den," I gestured. As Frank moved past me, I went nearer to look down at John lying there so quietly, and hated him even more than before. If

dead, I thought, especially if dead by Anne's push, he would be an even more destructive force in her life than alive.

Then I saw the crumpled letter in his hand, half under his body. Frank's voice called from the den, "The doctor says I'd better call Chief Norton, under the circumstances, but doc's on his way."

The sound of the dial clicking out the numbers of our local police station spurred me into what had to be done to protect Anne.

By the time Frank returned, I had finished and the official army letter, now smooth and flat, lay casually among the other opened bills and circulars on the hall table.

"I'll stay here," Frank said. "You'd better go to Anne. Poor kid! Damn shame this had to happen now."

Anne sat in the same chair as I had left her, her eyes still dark with horror. "He's dead, isn't he?" she asked numbly. "He was coming up the stairs behind me. He couldn't understand why I was so furious. I didn't know I could feel that much anger. That letter! The army—and he expected me to be pleased because it was Germany again. *Germany!* But I didn't mean to—I didn't want—"

"Hush!" I said sharply. "Shut

up and think about the baby for a minute."

Her voice cracked with tension. "You think I *haven't* been thinking of my child while you were over there?" She was on the ragged edge of hysteria.

"He slipped," I said deliberately. "He slipped and fell and struck his head on the candlestick. It was an accident. Do you understand, Anne? It was only an accident."

I couldn't be sure that she heard me. She had the withdrawn look of one listening for a faint, faraway sound. Suddenly, she clutched her abdomen and slumped across the table in pain.

I sat there beside her, stroking her hair and repeating slowly over and over, as to a retarded child, "It was an accident. He slipped and fell. You loved him. You were happy together. It was an accident." At last I saw the lights of a car swing in next door, and I ran across to bring back the doctor.

He ordered an ambulance immediately, and little Todd was born that night. It was a near thing for Anne and him, and hours passed before we were sure both would live.

By the time Chief Norton could question her about that night, it was just a brief formality, and John's death was put down as a regrettable accident.

I think even Anne eventually convinced herself that John had fallen unaided.

When she was home, at last, with her young son, I asked, "You *will* stay on here, won't you, Anne?"

Her clear gray eyes widened in surprise. "Why, of course. This was our first real home, our only home." She blinked away the tears before they had a chance to form.

So Anne has stayed in Brampton and become a very dear part of our lives. Little Todd is beginning to talk now, and it's adorable to hear him try to say Alicia; it comes out "Weesha." He's almost as pre-

cious to me as Marcie's children, whom I see so seldom.

And Don! He spoils Todd dreadfully, always bringing him toys and sweets. He's planning to adopt Todd when he and Anne are married next spring. It will be a fine marriage; they have so many common interests, not least of which is Don's love of Brampton and complete lack of wanderlust.

Why, if I'd had any doubt but that their happiness would be the final outcome, I'd never have given the iron candlestick a low swinging putt into John's head when he moaned lightly, lying at the foot of the staircase, while Frank phoned the police.

Who Is Jim Vogelbaugh?

by D. J. Bart

Tuesday morning. Worst day of the week—ever notice how everybody has a certain day that's their worst day of the week?—anyway, Tuesday morning and I'm walking to the curb with my mug of coffee, scanning the yard and curb for the possible landing site of the morning paper.

The paperboy's running behind schedule . . . comes around the corner on his bike pumping like crazy, misses me by inches, and throws the paper into the neighbor's yard, hitting Vogelbaugh; hits him right on the head with *my* rolled-up newspaper.

Oh, I forgot to mention . . . I'm an efficiency expert by trade. I do studies in offices to ascertain where people would be the most effective and where the traffic patterns are—stuff like that. Anyway, I like to minimize unnecessary movements and . . . well, the part I forgot, I was also watering the row of pansies along the walk with the hose *while* I was scouting for the paper. Efficient.

When my airborne paper was still a good ten feet from Vogelbaugh's head—the trajectory was blatantly apparent—I let fly with a stream of water, inundating the paperboy, who immediately let out a stream of his own—mostly invectives.

"You sprayed me!" is about the only repeatable thing he said. He mentioned my mother, whom I was sure he didn't even know. He seemed to question my children's actual parentage, making a reference to the mailman.

"It'll save you from showering," I called, "if you ever bother."

The kid held up a digital response.

Now, the reason my neighbor was out in his yard at the same I was is that he had this weird habit of monitoring everything I did so as not to be outdone by my actions, no matter how insignificant. I buy a new car, he buys a new car; we go to Acapulco, they go to Cancún.

Since I had already sprayed the paperboy, Vogelbaugh decided to let fly with my paper, which he had picked up after it hit him on the noggin. It completely missed the almost-gone kid, however, and hit the windshield of Mrs. Denner's Volkswagen bus. She

swerved and ran up onto the Samuelses' yard, deciding at the last minute to park half-in, half-on their front porch, the flooring sticking up around the back of the car like a gray picket fence.

A week of litigation ended with lawyers exchanging bills and Vogelbaugh building the Samuelses a new porch. The Volkswagen was repaired by way of the benevolent restitution Vogelbaugh's insurance company provided, just before they benevolently canceled his policy.

Another Tuesday. My wife sets coffee in front of me.

"Don't you think this has gone far enough?" she asked.

You know how you'll play with a person, pretend not to understand what they're getting at . . . "What?" I inquired innocently.

She turned slowly and sipped her coffee; her eyes seemed to be steamed over from the hot beverage. Actually, though, she was conveying, the way a woman does, that she knew the game but was too old and wise to play it with me.

I shrugged and spoke at the same time—efficiently. "Hey, I'm just living my life. Vogelbaugh is the guy who insists on playing one-upmanship."

She sighed as women are prone to do and shook her head, also a characteristic of a lot of women. "You know you just enjoy stirring people up," she said.

"Oh, really?"

She nodded. "Yes, Harry, I think you just do it to make up for all the regimentation and *efficiency* you inject into people's lives like some kind of mad scientist." She pronounced the word *efficiency* like you would say "bug" if one had just flown in your mouth.

I was about to remind her that my work was what provided the beautiful house we were living in, but it wasn't, the house was provided by her inheritance. My job paid well, but not well enough to live in Seven Hills.

I tacked. "Hey, you're the one who said Vogelbaugh was a jerk," I reminded her.

Rinsing out her cup under the faucet, she mumbled something that sounded a lot like: "... *you* were a jerk."

Course, I can't be sure.

Anyway (furthering the boating analogy), I decided to sail directly into the wind. "Mary," I said quietly, "did it ever occur to you that I do what I do, as far as other people are concerned, to keep a semblance of sanity in a crazy world filled with crazy people?"

"No," she said, "because that's not the reason." And then she walked from the room.

When most people are right, it really doesn't bug me all that much because it happens so infrequently, but when Mary's right, it really irritates me—like itching on the inside, impossible to reach. I was on my feet and following when I realized it was time for *Jeopardy*. I turned around and switched on the TV. Setting Mary right would just have to wait until after the show.

Twenty minutes later, the guy from a small town in Iowa and the woman pet-groomer from Northern California were both glaring at the third button pusher, a male librarian from St. Louis, as if they were considering contestantcide. The librarian hadn't missed an answer. The pedantic little twit was beginning to bug me, too, but the show ended without bloodshed and I went to look for Mary.

I found her mothering some small plants that were growing out of the ground, as plants often do. She didn't look up even when my shadow darkened her work area.

"An incompetent military leader with an ego the size of Utah," I said. Making up *Jeopardy* answers is one of my favorite pastimes. I stared at my wife until she responded.

"I don't want to play. Anyway, that's a dumb question."

"It's not a question, it's an answer," I explained. That same explanation had been offered many times before.

"I don't care, Harry," Mary said as she stabbed the ground next to a plant with a tiny little shovel. Or miniature spade; I don't know much about gardening.

"Who is Saddam Hussein?" I explained, in the form of a question.

Even though I couldn't see her eyes I knew she had rolled them. After twenty years of marriage you just know.

The next day we were burglarized. Mary was at her *t'ai chi* class, and I was efficiently pursuing my chosen line of work. Without forewarning or even a prescient feeling, we were suddenly VCR-less, stereoless, and missing various other small items including two one hundred dollar bills I kept ingeniously hidden under the VCR. I kept that cash because of all the hours I spent at my grandfather's knee as a child, being lectured about the Great Depression. Which I always considered a contradiction in terms; I mean what's *great* about a . . . well, anyway, I kept the two hundred in cash as a sort of memorial to the old man, who wasn't in any way at fault for being abysmally boring.

Believe it or not, two days later the Vogelbaughs announced to the neighborhood that they too had been burglarized.

I wondered how they'd managed it.

"We think it was the same guy that stole your stuff!" Sissy, the wife, said excitedly. Her eyes were bright with the reflection of a stage light only she could see.

I've noticed that my kids, when they're telling lies, get this glazed over, starry-eyed expression, as if it were necessary to tune out a little to pull off the prevarication. Sissy looked like that as she listed the booty scored by the villain in this *alleged* robbery.

"... VCR, stereo, some other things, just like with your burglary. But he got over *five* hundred in cash from us." Her eyes were incandescent now, we could have roasted marshmallows in the glow. I knew she was as full of hot air as a balloon that people with a death wish insist on riding under.

Her husband Jim was unable to contribute to the conversation; his mouth was too full of *gloat*. He did grin a lot, though; Cheshireish.

In *his* mind, he was one up.

As criminals often do, the genuine burglar returned to our house for a second go-round. The cops told me as they were carrying him out on the stretcher that crooks frequently return to the house they have just burglarized, knowing that the owners will have replaced the stolen items.

Unfortunately for this burglar, I had come home ten minutes prior to his break-in to get an office layout I needed for an afternoon meeting.

"You won't shoot," said he.

"Oh, yes, I will," said I.

He turned to leave. It was probably the smirk on his face that did it. Made me shoot him, I mean. Dead center, too, but they told me he'd be good as new by the time he was to pay his debt to society.

Of course, three days later, Vogelbaugh *killed* the guy who broke into *his* house. Shot him six times, reloaded, and shot him four more. Seemed a little like overkill to me.

"Guess it wasn't the same guy after all," Vogelbaugh said to me, the intermittent flash of red from the patrolman's car flickering across his pale features as if he were blushing erratically.

I nodded slowly, wondering if I should tell him what a jerk he was, and then I remembered he had shot the guy *ten times*.



"WE THINK IT WAS THE SAME GUY THAT STOLE YOUR STUFF," SISSY SAID
EXCITEDLY.

"Must not have been," I told him quickly, mustering as much conviction in my voice as was possible. Then I got the hell out of his yard and headed for my house. My neighbor was obviously unstable.

That night was unseasonably cool with low humidity; we left the bedroom window open for the fresh air we both preferred over air conditioning. A light cover and a light breeze had me hovering on the brink of dreamy sleep within minutes.

The Vogelbaughs' bedroom was about ten feet away and below us, also opened to the night air. We might as well have had an intercom: the ever-increasing volume of their argument soon had us both staring at the barely visible ceiling of our bedroom. Now, instead of the edge of sleep, I was hanging on the palpable pause between Jim or Sissy's next outburst.

"Yeah, he was out of work, but my brother wouldn't have broken into *any* house, let alone his own sister's," Sissy screeched.

Something hard hit something harder.

I heard Mary turn toward me in the darkness. "The guy he shot was Sissy's brother?" she asked. This was the first time she had spoken to me since I shot "the poor guy" who had broken into our house. She was a proponent of the sanctity of life and all that garbage.

"Yeah," I replied simply. I could be laconic, too.

Vogelbaugh was shouting now. "Hey, the guy was a loser, you said it yourself. Hell, he drove an *American* car, for Pete's sake." Vogelbaugh loved his "Beemer."

That irked me a little. It seemed somehow insensitive. Irrationally, I guess because I was on the verge of sleep, I wondered if my two-year-old Buick down in the garage had overheard him.

From below, Sissy took her turn. "I went along with you putting that jerk Harry in his place, but this is just too damn much. He was my brother!"

Jerk Harry!

It was just a few minutes later that I got *the* idea. The rest of the night I listened to Jim and Sissy and slowly, carefully, *efficiently* perfected the Plan.

"I'm fine, Harry, how are you?" my wife asked, from two thousand miles away at her folks' house. Then more banalities and I listened to the kids for another ten minutes and hung up.

She'd be another week or so, she had said. I looked out the win-

dow and, predictably, there was Vogelbaugh, watering the row of flowers at the back of his lawn.

I went outside and over to the redwood fence. He saw me, turned off the hose, and walked over, the fence between us. His light hair was plastered to his head, little wet curls on his high forehead; he looked a little like Caligula.

"Haven't seen your wife around lately," he declared.

I motioned him to come over to the back yard patio as I looked furtively toward his house. Instead of walking a mere six feet to the gate, he climbed clumsily over the fence, scraping an already sunburned leg on the rough ends of the boards.

We sat at the metal table. "Can I tell you something?" I asked.

Jim nodded, rubbing his leg.

I looked at him through squinted eyes, hoping my acting was good enough for the task. "First, let me ask *you* something, Jim. How're you and Sissy getting along?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"You guess?"

Pale blue eyes locked on me, and for a moment I felt as if I were in a rifle's crosshairs. He studied my face; more accurately, he *mined* my face for any trace of possible ridicule. After a couple of long moments, he merely shrugged again—as miserly with words as he was with good judgment.

"Well?" I insisted. "You get along or what?"

He scratched his stubbled cheek so fiercely I thought he'd start a fire. "Well, hell, Harry, you know how it is. You can hear us arguing, I guess."

I sat there for twenty heartbeats before saying anything. Leaning forward, I waited until he looked at me.

"I killed my wife," I said quietly, allowing just a hint of pride to surface in my voice, as a lure rises in water just ahead of an ascending fish.

Jim looked at me, not with the expected alarm but with a look of internal calculating, as if he were balancing some kind of weird books he kept inside his head. I knew that his discomfiture was due not to my allegation of murder but to the sudden drop of his self-worth on whatever demented scale by which he measured it. After all, I had killed a wife, but he hadn't. Without a word he rose and walked back to his yard, crossed it without a backward glance, and went inside.

I saw his wife Sissy just once more, late that night standing in

front of the bathroom window, facing the mirror above the sink, and she looked scared.

During the following week, before my wife returned, it was as if Sissy had just disappeared from the face of the earth. Normally, she could be seen so often throughout the day that a glance out the window at any time would as likely reward the viewer with her return or departure as not. Darren Vogelbaugh, their son, told me out by the garbage that Jim said their mother had left them for another man. He had sent the daughter, Tina, to stay with in-laws for awhile.

Jim had avoided me like a toxic waste dump. I knew what he had done, and I figured he thought of me as a co-conspirator and that he should avoid contact for awhile.

"How was your drive back?" I asked my wife as I followed her up the walk to our house, luggage hanging from most of my extremities. The kids were already inside, one on the phone and the other paying homage to the TV.

"Good," she replied in her usual laconic manner.

As she held the door for me, I glanced over to see my competitive neighbor glaring out his bedroom window. Boy, if looks could kill. Hell with him if he can't take a joke.

Late that evening. Kids in bed, Mary on the couch, squirming under the weight of something yet to be spoken. . . .

"Harry," she began finally, "I've been thinking—"

I interrupted. "A guy who's so naive he'll believe anything I tell him and is so competitive he'll kill to keep up with me."

As usual, Mary opened her mouth to protest that she didn't want to play *Jeopardy* with me. But then her eyes widened, focusing on something behind me. I turned around to see my neighbor standing there staring at me, eyes flat and humorless.

"Who is Jim Vogelbaugh," he said quietly as he raised the gun and pointed it at me.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

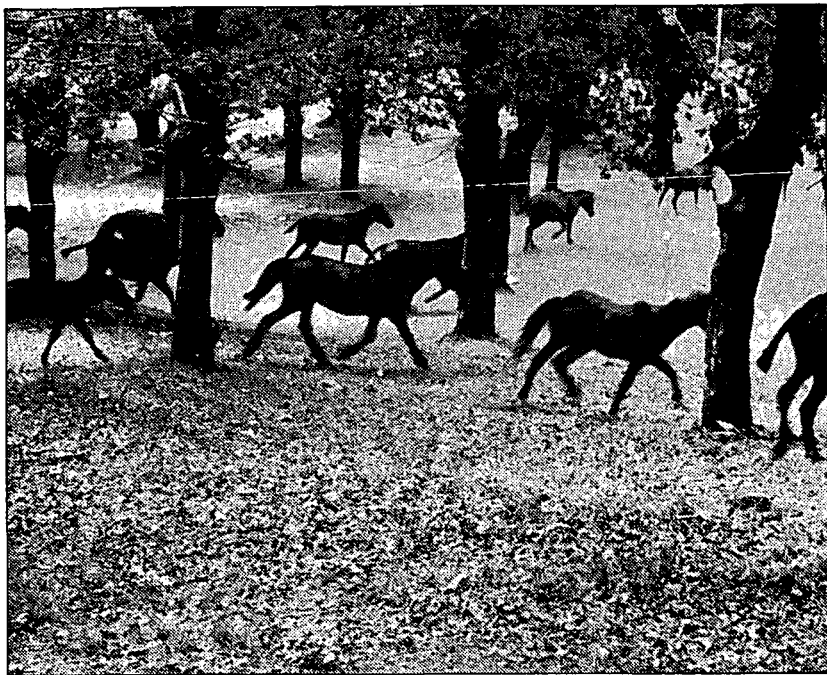


Photo by Josef Koudelka/Magnum

There may be something to the left that we'd rather not know about. Or even something to the right. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 283.

The Charnwood Forest Murder

by C. M. Chan

Phillip Bethancourt was lounging in his London flat, reading last week's *TLS*. His girlfriend Marla Tate had that morning left town for a week and a half, and Bethancourt was looking forward to time spent in solitary pursuits such as reading, maybe even watching television. Marla was one of England's top fashion models so she was frequently called away for location shoots, but circumstances over the past few months had combined to keep her in London, and Bethancourt was feeling rather exhausted in consequence. Marla enjoyed dancing, parties, dining out, the theater—in short, she was not the sort of woman who was very easily persuaded to spend an evening curled up on a couch reading a book. In her absence, Bethancourt planned to do just that.

He stretched out his legs, settled his glasses more comfortably on his nose, and, his eyes still fastened on the paper, reached out to light a cigarette. At this slight movement, the Borzoi hound at his feet raised its head hopefully. It had not

been taken out since the morning, and was quite sure it must be time for the daily park run. In fact, there was no doubt in its mind that the park run was long overdue, but being a dog of great dignity, it was not about to sit up and beg for its treat like a lowly terrier. The dog subsided with a sigh.

Bethancourt had just decided to purchase three books instead of two when the telephone rang. He answered it with a preoccupied air.

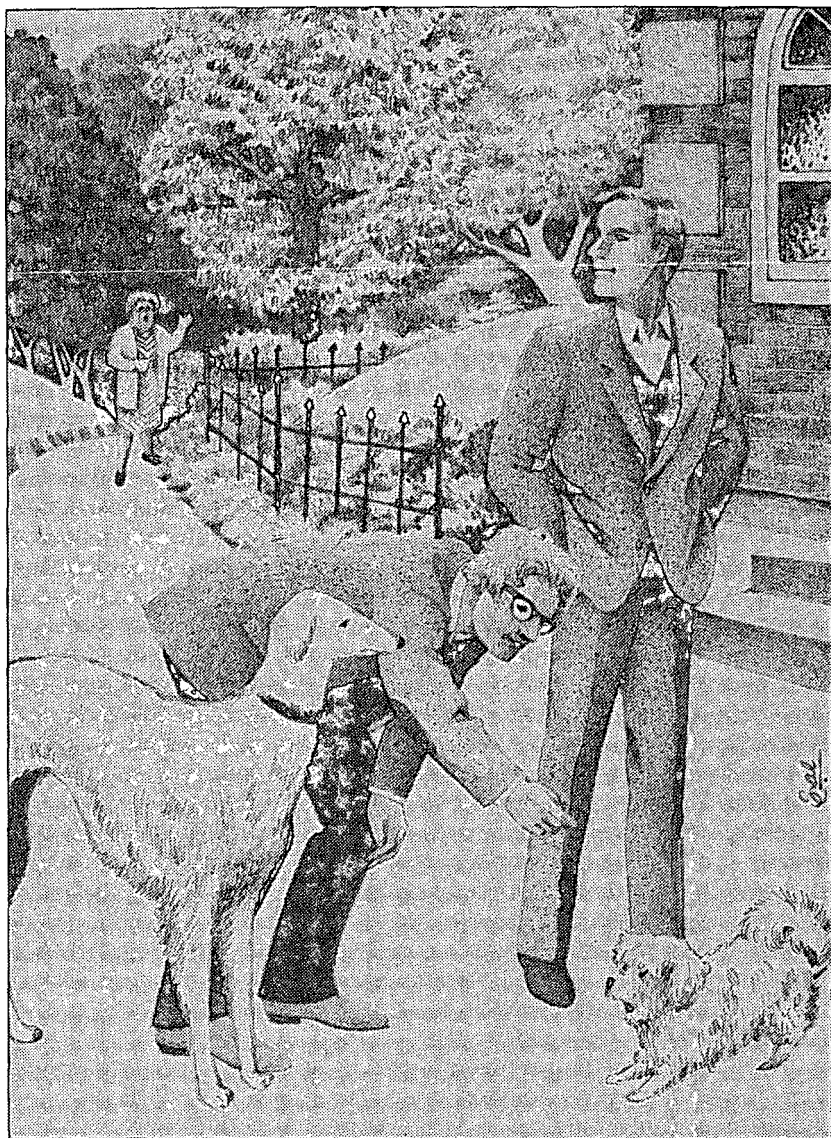
"Is Phillip Bethancourt there?" asked an unknown female voice.

"Yes," said Bethancourt, who was still scanning the last paragraph of a review. "I mean, speaking."

"My name is Natalie Padmore. We don't know each other, but a friend of mine is acquainted with your sister."

"Charming," responded Bethancourt promptly, although inwardly he groaned. Anyone recommended by his sister was unlikely to find favor in his eyes.

"I took the liberty of ringing you up," continued Mrs. Pad-



"YOU MUST BE NATALIE PADMORE'S DETECTIVES," SHE SAID.

more, "because my friend seemed to think you had some connections with Scotland Yard."

"I have some friends there," admitted Bethancourt, daring to hope that this was not after all a call to take some unknown woman to dinner and converse politely about his sister and her friends. "Can I be of service in any way?"

"I know I'm imposing," went on Mrs. Padmore, "but, you see, a rather curious thing has happened up here. I should explain, I live in Leicestershire, near the Charnwood Forest."

"Quite," said Bethancourt. "Lovely country there."

"Yes, it is pretty. In any case, the old headmistress of my school also lived in the village—she came here when she retired. She passed away last week, under what I must call very suspicious circumstances."

"I see," said Bethancourt, whose spirits were rising with every word Mrs. Padmore spoke. He was an avid amateur detective who persistently dogged the steps of his Scotland Yard friends on their more interesting cases. "Have you spoken to the local police?"

"Yes, of course. They've been very nice, but they won't believe it's not an accident. They held the inquest the day before

yesterday and came up with a verdict of death by misadventure. It's been very frustrating."

"I'm sure it has." Bethancourt had sunk into a chair and was lighting a cigarette with an air of definite pleasure. "Perhaps if you could tell me what happened?"

"I'm so sorry," she apologized. "I'm afraid I haven't been very coherent. Miss Pottlesdon died last Thursday, apparently from eating a poisonous mushroom. She had been out picking mushrooms that day, but Mr. Bethancourt, she was an expert. She and her friend, Miss Carberry, had been picking mushrooms for years with never a mishap. It is inconceivable that Miss Pottlesdon should have selected the wrong kind in the first place, but then to say that she took it home, washed it carefully, and cut it up—well, it's just beyond belief."

"I see what you mean," said Bethancourt thoughtfully. To him, it was perfectly believable.

"I know it's asking a great deal of a perfect stranger," continued Mrs. Padmore, "but when Debra mentioned you, I thought there might be one last hope. I was very fond of Miss Pottlesdon, and so was my husband. We'd very much appreci-

ate it if you could do anything towards getting the matter cleared up."

"Well," said Bethancourt, still thoughtful. The thing did not sound as promising as he had first hoped; still, it might be worth a look. You could never tell about these things. "I could try to come up this weekend and poke around a bit," he said cautiously. "I would have to check with my friend at Scotland Yard, of course, to see if he's free. Beyond that, I'm afraid, there's nothing else to be done, unless we can turn up fresh evidence working on our own, so to speak. Even Scotland Yard can't barge in where it's not wanted."

"If you could spare the time, that would be more than I'd hoped for," said Mrs. Padmore. "It's awfully good of you."

"Not at all," said Bethancourt, laying down his cigarette and picking up paper and pencil. "If you could give me your telephone number and address?"

Equipped with this information, he rang off, with promises to let her know about his plans.

"It's not much of a case, Cerberus," he said, addressing the dog. "But it's the first one that's mine instead of Scotland Yard's. We'll go up and ease the lady's mind this weekend. It's only polite."

* * *

"What do you mean, do I want to go to the East Midlands for the weekend?" asked Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons suspiciously. "I thought you were spending the next ten days holed up in your flat with a book."

"Something better has turned up," replied Bethancourt. "It's my first case, Jack. You've got to come and help me with it."

"What on earth are you talking about?" said his friend. An alarming thought occurred to him. "Oh, Lord, you haven't gone and applied for a private detective's license, have you?"

"Of course not," said Bethancourt. "Although," he added, "that's not a bad idea. It would keep my family off my back about not having a job."

"But then you would actually have to work," pointed out Gibbons. "Not to mention the fact that you haven't the least idea how to set about an investigation—"

"I'm sure I could figure it out," retorted Bethancourt. "Jack, you're deliberately side-tracking me. Don't you want to hear about my case?"

"I expect you'll tell me whether I do or not."

Bethancourt blithely ignored this reply. "It's a friend of my sister's. Her old headmistress

ate some poisonous mushrooms and died, and she wants me to prove it wasn't an accident."

"But Phillip," protested Gibbons, "it probably was an accident."

"I know that," said Bethancourt, his enthusiasm undiminished. "But I can't turn down my first case, Jack. We'll go up, have a look around, tell her that we're terribly sorry but we must agree with the police, and be back by Monday morning. Come on, Jack. It's off in Charnwood Forest—a perfect country retreat. Some fresh air would do you good."

Gibbons sighed. "Where are you staying?" he asked. "With this woman?"

"No," answered Bethancourt. "She offered, but I graciously refused. After all, she is a friend of my sister's, even if she did sound nice over the phone. One can't go about recklessly promising to stay with people who know my sister—God only knows what that might lead to."

"So that means an hotel. Phillip, I can't afford an hotel. Unlike you, I have to work for my money, and detective sergeants are not that well paid."

"Don't be silly," said Bethancourt, hurt. "It's my case—I'll pay for the lodgings. It's not an hotel anyway. There isn't one in the village, and I thought

we'd better stay there so as to pick up all the local color. It's a B and B."

Gibbons sighed again. He did not want to spend his weekend on a busman's holiday detecting in the East Midlands. On the other hand, Bethancourt was his closest friend, and there was no denying that he had been helpful in the past with some of the official cases Gibbons had worked on. "Very well," he said.

"Splendid! I'll pick you up after work tomorrow and we'll go from there. See you then."

Gibbons woke early on Saturday to a grey morning holding the promise of rain. From the open window above his head came the exhilarating scent of fresh air. Exhilarating, at any rate, to a man who had spent the winter in London. Gibbons felt relaxed and content, largely owing to the fact that he had ruthlessly abandoned both map and driving to Bethancourt the evening before and had himself a good kip. He was even in a mood to admit that a weekend in the country might be just the thing.

He glanced at the other bed. Bethancourt was still soundly asleep, face pressed into the pillow, fair hair in disarray, one arm flung over the side of the

bed. Gibbons decided to let him sleep, knowing he had sat up late the night before reading a book on mushrooms. He himself, however, rose and, throwing on a robe, went in search of the bathroom.

Bethancourt was still asleep when Gibbons returned from his morning ablutions, but Cerberus had arisen and looked appealingly at the detective as he dressed and prepared to make his way downstairs. Gibbons took pity on him.

"Come then," he said softly. "I'll take you out, boy."

The feathered tail waved gratefully.

They slipped out without encountering anyone and emerged into a quiet side street that led away to the left to the village proper. As Gibbons recollected from the night before, this consisted of a group of houses, a pub, and a small church. The bed and breakfast house stood alone, opposite a wide, fenced-in meadow. Beyond were the eaves of Charnwood Forest, a vague grey bulk on the horizon in the morning mist.

Gibbons breathed in the damp air deeply, while Cerberus cocked a leg against a large bush. Man and dog paused a moment, taking stock of their surroundings, and then Cerberus bounded away, clear-

ing the fence in one graceful leap, and running off across the meadow. With growing horror, Gibbons realized that the dog was making for the single animate object in the field, namely, a large animal of the bovine persuasion. Gibbons was utterly incapable of telling bull from cow, especially at this distance, but it definitely had horns. He advanced to the fence and called loudly, "Cerberus! Come!"

He had heard Bethancourt use these selfsame words many times before, and they had seldom failed to produce the desired effect, but Cerberus showed no sign of obeying them now. He continued to run fleetly toward the bull (or cow, as the case might be), while Gibbons ineffectually repeated his call. He had awful visions of the bull (if it was one) charging and skewering his friend's beloved pet, but this was not at all what happened. Instead, the bull paused and turned slowly, sniffing the air and regarding the giant animal racing towards him. He appeared to consider his situation for a moment, and then took to his heels. Gibbons breathed a sigh of relief, for now that he had a rear view, the absence of an udder proclaimed the sex of the animal. Cursing, Gibbons began climbing over the fence, al-

though he had no idea how he proposed to catch the dog. Cerberus was enjoying himself thoroughly, having nearly caught up with the bull. Gibbons ran after him, shouting loudly and sternly. Cerberus nipped at the bull's tail and then paused. Gibbons redoubled his calls. Cerberus turned, looked questioningly at him for a moment, and then, to Gibbons' everlasting relief, trotted toward him, tongue lolling happily. Gibbons led him firmly from the meadow, whereupon the hound promptly deposited a large pile of excrement in the middle of the lane. Gibbons, who had not thought to prepare for this eventuality and who did not wish to soil his handkerchief, left the mess steaming in the air and took the dog inside.

Upstairs, he found Bethancourt pulling a heather-colored jumper over his head.

"You're up," he said.

"I could hardly stay asleep with you screaming underneath the window," replied Bethancourt. "What on earth happened?"

"Cerberus got into the meadow and was chasing a bull."

"Really?" Bethancourt put on his glasses and peered out the window. "That's not a bull," he announced.

"Not a bull?" Gibbons joined him at the window. The cow had wandered back toward the fence and was quietly cropping grass. "It hasn't got an udder," he pointed out.

"Neither," replied Bethancourt, "has it got any testicles. A cow doesn't have an udder if she hasn't carried a calf, but a bull has testicles no matter what."

"Oh. Well, in any case, Cerberus was chasing it."

"Not very good behavior, but it doesn't seem to have done her any harm. Shall we go down and get some tea? And then we can go call on the doctor. He doesn't have surgery hours today, but he invited us to come round to his house."

Gibbons, suddenly reminded of the purpose for this trip, acquiesced quietly.

After breakfast, the two young men, accompanied by the dog, walked up the lane toward the center of the village. This consisted of a cluster of houses grouped about a small green with a very picturesque and clearly nonfunctioning well at one corner. Most of the yards were shaded by large trees, and the forest loomed over all, pressed back just far enough to allow for a little yard space and the odd garden at the rear of the houses. All the

buildings appeared residential except for one, slightly larger than the others, outside of which hung a wooden sign proclaiming it to be the village pub, The Hare.

"It's very peaceful here," said Gibbons, looking up at the trees, which were just beginning to show signs of green along their branches.

"Eh?" replied Bethancourt, who was consulting a scrap of paper. "Oh, yes. It's very out of the way—I believe even the post office is in the market town on the A road. I think the doctor's house must be up this way."

"Oh, right," said Gibbons vaguely. "I hope we get a sunny day tomorrow. This place is really very pretty."

Bethancourt was peering at one of the houses and frowning. "Perhaps the other side of the street," he said.

"What? Oh, right, the doctor's place." Gibbons redirected his attention to the houses, only to be distracted almost immediately by an immense and very ancient tree standing in one of the yards. "Oh, look," he said. "Is that an oak?"

Bethancourt shot him a withering glance. "Beech," he said briefly. "Come along, Jack, and do help me look. We're a bit late already."

"Right-oh," said Gibbons,

still staring up into the branches of the beech tree.

Bethancourt sighed and looked ahead toward a house two or three farther on, where a rather stout man with a thatch of unruly grey hair and an exceeding well-trimmed beard was waving at them.

"There," he said with relief. "That must be Dr. Preston. Don't dawdle, Jack."

"This must be them. I wonder which is Mr. Bethancourt and which the Scotland Yard man. They both look very young."

Dr. Preston had, in fact, forgotten his genial invitation. This did not matter greatly, as Natalie Padmore had arrived at breakfast time to remind him of it. He joined her at the window now and agreed that both men, who were proceeding slowly up the street inspecting the names of the houses, were rather young. One was tall and slim, with fair, shaggy hair and horn-rimmed glasses, while the other was shorter, with fierce blue eyes and reddish-brown hair cropped short. They were accompanied by a large Russian wolfhound of far greater dignity than either of the humans.

"The tall one's Bethancourt," he opined. "His hair's too long

for the police. Ruth!" he called to his wife. "Our guests are coming."

Dr. Preston advanced to the door, swinging it wide and waving to attract the young men's attention. They mended their pace, coming swiftly up to meet him. "I'm Phillip Bethancourt," said the fair man, justifying the doctor's guess. "This is my friend, Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons."

They shook hands and were ushered inside and introduced to the two women. If Natalie Padmore had been surprised at Bethancourt's youth, he was equally surprised at hers. He had somehow imagined a plump matron of a certain complacency, but what he found was a slender, attractive woman of about his own age, dressed in a flowered print that much became her. Mrs. Preston, however, was everything that Mrs. Padmore was not. She was a little stout, with a warm smile and apple cheeks and softly curling grey hair. Both she and her husband wore identical steel-rimmed spectacles.

Coffee was served while Bethancourt and Gibbons made appropriate remarks about the picturesqueness of the village. As soon as they were settled with their coffee mugs and Bethancourt had asked for and

received permission to smoke, Natalie Padmore said, "It was very kind of you to come down. We really do appreciate it."

"All unofficial, of course," put in Gibbons cautiously.

"Yes," she said. "We understand that. The doctor here can give you further details—"

"Indeed," said Preston. "At least, I can tell you what happened. It was a clear case of mushroom poisoning—no doubt about it." He sipped at his coffee. "It was the Tuesday before last, at the end of the day. My nurse took a call from Miss Pottlesdon and told me she sounded very bad—could hardly speak. I rushed round straightaway, of course. I was rather expecting a heart attack or a stroke. She was over seventy, after all, and not in the best of health. Smoked too much." He eyed the cigarette in Bethancourt's hand, but the young man did not appear to notice. "But when I arrived, it was clearly something different. She had violent cramps, vomiting, diarrhea—everything pointed to some kind of poison. She couldn't walk, could barely speak. Of course, she was stubborn. She'd started feeling ill in the night, but had waited over twelve hours before she gave in and called me."

"Might you have been able to save her if she had called

straightaway?" asked Gibbons.

The doctor shook his head. "Actually, no," he replied. "With this kind of poisoning, there's a large gap between the time the poison is ingested and the time symptoms appear. By then, the poison is already firmly established in the bloodstream. It attacks the liver and kidneys, making it impossible for the victim to remove the toxins. There's very little that can be done. In any case," he continued, "I didn't realize at the time what it was, I just knew she had been poisoned. I rushed her straight off to hospital, of course, where we could at least alleviate the symptoms. It was at that point that I recollected her penchant for gathering mushrooms. I asked her, and she admitted to having eaten some mushrooms at dinner the night before. She insisted she had looked them over carefully, but it was nonetheless obvious that that's what it was. She rallied slightly that evening, but by the next morning, she was in a coma. She died the day after." He shrugged helplessly and sipped his coffee.

"Your diagnosis was confirmed at the postmortem?" asked Bethancourt.

The doctor nodded. "Oh, yes," he said. "No doubt of it—Miss Pottlesdon died from eating a poisonous mushroom."

"But that's just what's so perplexing," put in Mrs. Padmore. "She and her friend Miss Carberry had been gathering mushrooms for years. They were always very careful—so many times Miss Pottlesdon told me that it was all a matter of never relaxing your vigilance. She used to say, 'You must examine every individual specimen and identify it absolutely. If your attention begins to wander, you must stop at once. And then, once you've got them home and are washing them off, you have to examine each one over again.'" She spread her hands in a little gesture of bewilderment.

"All that's true, Natalie," said Mrs. Preston, "but you must remember, she was very elderly. Sometimes people of that age do get muddled."

"Not Miss Pottlesdon," said Mrs. Padmore firmly. "She was clear as a bell, you know that."

"That's true," agreed Dr. Preston. "I admit I was considerably surprised that she should be so careless, but the fact remains that she did eat a bad one. And if she didn't make a mistake, then what you're saying is that someone deliberately gave her one. That's murder, Natalie, and although a great many people disliked her, I hardly think they would go so far as that."

"I know, I know," said Mrs. Padmore, shaking her head. "But there's something wrong about it, all the same."

"What do you think?" asked Bethancourt after they had taken their leave of the doctor and his wife and dissuaded Mrs. Padmore from accompanying them further.

"It seems pretty straightforward," answered Gibbons. "But as you say, it's a good excuse to get away for the weekend."

"I'm not sure I agree," said Bethancourt, answering the first part of Gibbons' statement. He led the way down the street thoughtfully, pausing to say sharply, "Cerberus! Out of that garden. Heel."

Gibbons, recalling his earlier adventure, watched indigantly as the great dog immediately came to heel.

"You could tell," said Bethancourt, absently patting his pet's head, "that the doctor didn't think there was anything in Mrs. Padmore's protests."

"Quite," said Gibbons, nodding automatically. His attention had been caught by a brightly colored bird perched on a limb of the beech tree.

"But even he," continued Bethancourt, "spoke of being surprised that Miss Pottlesdon had made an error. That makes me wonder if there isn't some-

thing odd about this business after all."

Gibbons opened his mouth to protest and then remembered that Bethancourt was feeling rather proud of being called into a case personally and no doubt wanted to do his best to investigate it, even if it was a mare's nest. So he said mildly, "Perhaps. We'll have to see if anyone else feels the same. What kind of bird—oh, it's gone."

They were alone as they walked down the street, heading for the outskirts of the village and Constable Strikes's house. They passed one elderly gentleman who was hard at work in his front garden, but beyond that all was still. As they came abreast of the little church, however, they were assaulted from behind by a shrill barking. Cerberus, who was still walking sedately at his master's left side, turned round abruptly but did not return the greeting being so enthusiastically offered by an overweight, elderly Lhasa apso.

"Hello there," said Bethancourt, bending down and extending a hand. The Lhasa merely retreated a step and continued to bark.

There was a lane running past the church, downhill towards the forest, and upon this

there hove into view a short, dumpy woman of about seventy. She seemed rather out of breath and began calling out in a high-pitched voice, "Marzipan! Marzipan, stop that and come here at once. Marzipan, that dog could gobble you up and still want breakfast. Marzipan!"

The Lhasa ignored this. Cerberus, with great disdain, had sat down and was looking over the smaller dog's head at the churchyard.

"Hello," called Bethancourt. "My dog's quite friendly—he won't hurt yours."

The woman was scurrying up the path, still ineffectually calling her dog. Arrived at the scene, she promptly scooped him up in her arms and shook him, saying automatically, "Bad dog. Bad dog, Marzipan." She squinted at the two young men. "I'm terribly sorry," she went on. "He never has learned to mind very well. I should really keep him on the lead."

"Not at all," said Bethancourt genially. "No harm done."

"Cerberus wouldn't hurt a fly," added Gibbons, but she did not appear, now that she was standing next to him, to really entertain any great fears of the Borzoi.

"You must be Natalie Padmore's detectives," she said.

"How exciting. I'm Dottie Carberry."

"We were very sorry to hear about your friend, Miss Carberry," said Gibbons.

Miss Carberry's eyes grew distant. "Yes," she said, "it was too bad. Poor Nan. We'd been so close, you see, for so long. Even now, I haven't really taken it in that she's gone. Not that it matters much," she added, more cheerfully. "I'll be gone soon myself. That's nice, somehow, to know I shan't have to wait long to see her again. Of course," she added hastily, "I'm Christian, so that's what I believe. If you're not, I do apologize."

Neither Gibbons nor Bethancourt was quite sure what to say in reply to this speech, so Bethancourt merely said, "We were coming to see you later. I hope you won't mind?"

"Oh, no," she assured them, looking nevertheless rather uncomfortable. "I live just down the lane there. As soon as I've finished the church flowers, I shall be back at my cottage. I could give you some tea. Or coffee. Or," she added doubtfully, "there might be some sherry. Young men nowadays always seem to want spirits. Perhaps I could go to the pub and get some whisky. Only I never know what to serve with it. Cakes and biscuits don't seem

to go very well. Nuts, I suppose, would be best."

Both Bethancourt and Gibbons assured her that they did not really want spirits and that she was not to go to any trouble on their account.

"I'll ask my niece," she decided, ignoring them. "She's come down to stay the weekend with me. She's young and will know what to do. Yes, that will definitely be best." She beamed at them.

"Really, Miss Carberry," said Bethancourt, "I'm quite fond of tea, and so is Jack here. We drink it all the time, don't we, Jack?"

"Constantly," affirmed Gibbons. "Nothing like a nice cuppa, that's what I always say."

But the subject of refreshments had apparently flown from Miss Carberry's mind. "So you haven't found out anything yet?" she asked.

"No," answered Bethancourt. "We've only just started, you see. We're just on our way to see Constable Strikes."

"Such a nice young man," said Miss Carberry. "Always so helpful and polite. Not at all like that inspector fellow. He was in a dreadful hurry all the time. Well, I'll be seeing you later. It will be so nice for Pam to have some young men around."

She turned to go, setting Marzipan on the ground. The little dog immediately returned to his previous stance and began barking again.

"Marzipan, stop that. Marzipan, come!"

"Goodbye," said Bethancourt. "We'll take Cerberus away, and no doubt that will quiet him. Come along, Cerberus."

He and Gibbons turned again along the road, followed by the dog. In a few moments, the barking behind them ceased and Miss Carberry's voice came faintly back to them, saying, "Bad dog. Bad dog, Marzipan."

P. C. Strikes was vastly uneasy. He had known, of course, for some days that a friend of Mrs. Padmore's was coming to ask questions about Miss Pottlesdon's death. This had not disturbed him unduly; after all, amateurs were only amateurs, and Detective Inspector Daniels had come down personally to look into it and had done everything that could be done. Inspector Daniels had been very efficient and had impressed Constable Strikes very much, almost banishing from the young man's mind the certainty of his knowledge that Miss Pottlesdon did not make mistakes at all, much less fatal ones.

Strikes's uneasiness had come upon him last night in the pub, where he had discovered that one of Mrs. Padmore's friends was a Scotland Yard man. This gave the matter an entirely new aspect. Amateur detectives were one thing: Scotland Yard was quite another. He had rung the station and left a message for Inspector Daniels, but that gentleman had not yet replied. Bereft of guidance, Strikes was not at all sure what to do. Should he clam up and take an official stance, or look to the Scotland Yard man as a superior, which he certainly was? His wife had been no help. She had pointed out that Scotland Yard had no business sticking their noses in when they hadn't been called and that, on the other hand, if Strikes wanted to get anywhere in his career, it was not good policy to start out by aggravating Scotland Yard detectives. She had then hopped in the car and gone off to market, leaving him to manage alone.

He had been surprised to see two men not very much older than himself, accompanied by a large and very beautiful dog. Constable Strikes liked dogs, especially big ones, and this had served to break the ice, but now he could feel the awkward moment coming on, when he should have to make up his

mind one way or another. He was quite sure that, whatever he did, it would turn out to be the exact opposite of what Inspector Daniels would wish.

"Living right in the village," Bethancourt was saying, "you must know everyone well. Miss Carberry, for instance. She and Miss Pottlesdon were close?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Strikes, relieved at this line of questioning. "They were best friends, like. Miss Carberry, she grew up hereabouts, and when it came time for them to retire from their school—Miss Pottlesdon was headmistress, and Miss Carberry the English mistress—Miss Carberry found both their cottages for them. They always did things together—had supper together most nights. And as to the mushroom picking, sir, why, they did that every year. Miss Carberry's mother had taught her about it when she was a child, and she taught Miss Pottlesdon. They liked things of that sort. Both of them have fine kitchen gardens, and they was always swapping vegetables. Miss Carberry even keeps a few hens for eggs and shared them with Miss Pottlesdon. She tried to expand for poultry a few years back but said it wasn't worth the trouble and went back to her couple of hens."

"You've got a nice garden yourself, constable," said Gibbons, who was peering out the back window. "Keep it yourself?"

"That's my wife, sir. She likes the flowers, and to grow her own lettuces and beans and such. Says it cuts down the housekeeping expenses."

"I daresay it does," said Bethancourt, a little impatiently. He could not help but feel that his friend's mind was not entirely on their investigation. In fact, in his opinion, Gibbons had become completely besotted with country life in a very short time.

"Tell me," he continued, "what was your opinion of Miss Pottlesdon?"

"Oh, she was quite a character, sir," said Strikes. "Very particular, always knew just what she wanted and how she wanted it."

"Was she popular hereabouts?"

Strikes grinned. "Far from it, sir," he said. "She was too particular by half, like I said. And then, she had a nasty habit of sticking her nose into other people's business. She always knew what was going on and always spoke up if she didn't approve. She used to help run the church fete until the last couple of years, and you've never seen such a fuss. Vicar

couldn't manage to keep her out of it, though."

Sounds just like a headmistress, thought Bethancourt, and said aloud, "Were you surprised that she would make a mistake about the mushroom?"

Strikes frowned. "Oh, yes, sir, very. Everyone was. Miss Carberry may have taught her about it in the beginning, but she studied up on it good. Got a lot of books. She was really more knowledgeable than Miss Carberry in the end."

"But," said Bethancourt, "she was getting on. Older people sometimes get muddled."

Strikes hastened to put this idea right. "No, sir," he said firmly. "Her health wasn't the best, that's why she stopped doing the church fetes, but her mind was sharp as ever. I still can't quite see how she would have made such a mistake, but I thought perhaps she found a new mushroom she hadn't seen before and that's how she got mixed up."

This struck Bethancourt as highly unlikely. He was about to ask about the inquiry itself when the telephone rang. Strikes excused himself and went to answer it. When he returned, he looked both pleased and relieved.

"That was the inspector," he informed them. "I thought as

how you'd like to know about the investigation, so I asked him to come down. He's the one to talk to, as he was head of it. He said he'd be right along—won't take him more than fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Dear Lord," said Gibbons and glared at Bethancourt.

Detective Inspector Daniels was in a temper. He had not been pleased to have been sent to investigate the Pottlesdon death in the first place. He had swiftly satisfied himself that it was indeed an accident, the inquest verdict had confirmed it, and he had thought the matter was finished. To have Scotland Yard horning in uninvited at this late date was infuriating. He would have a thing or two to say to this Scotland Yard man, whoever he was. The Yard had no business here, and moreover, he hated to have his weekends interrupted.

He pulled up in front of P. C. Strikes's cottage and slammed the car door firmly behind him. He strode up the path and stabbed his finger sharply on the bell. In a moment the door was opened by Strikes, who was clearly relieved to see him.

"Good morning, sir," he said.

"Morning, Strikes. What's this all about?"

"They're in the living room, sir," replied Strikes, leading

the way. "I've told them a bit about Miss Pottlesdon, but nothing about the investigation. I waited for you for that, sir."

"Quite right, constable. Thank you."

Daniels strode into the living room and drew up short.

"Jack!" he exclaimed.

"Tom!" said Gibbons, his misgivings melting away at the sight of his old friend's face. "I didn't know this was your bailiwick."

"Well, it is," replied Daniels. "What on earth are you doing up here? Are you this Scotland Yard man that's got my constable all upset? You should know better than to go around frightening constables, Jack."

Gibbons chuckled. "All completely unofficial," he said. "Let me introduce my friend Phillip Bethancourt. Phillip, this is Tom Daniels, who was a friend of mine when I was in police training."

The two men shook hands.

"I'm afraid this is all my fault," said Bethancourt deprecatingly. "You see, I've got this gorgon of a sister . . ."

"Eh?" said Daniels, confused.

"His sister knows Natalie Padmore," explained Gibbons, "and was indiscreet enough to tell Natalie that Phillip here knows me."

"So the next thing I know,"

continued Bethancourt, "is that I'm getting phone calls imploring me to bring my Scotland Yard connections to bear on Miss Pottlesdon's mysterious death. I had to do it, inspector. My sister would have made my life unbearable if I hadn't."

"I see," said Daniels, grinning. "And you, Jack, as a good friend, had to help out."

Gibbons shrugged. "As I said, it's completely unofficial. Just a family matter, really. But Tom, it's good to see you. And you've made inspector already. That's fast moving."

Daniels shrugged and sank into a chair. "Luck, really. We're a small force up here, and the man above me had an unexpected heart attack just as I had happened to do rather a good bit of work. But how are you doing, Jack? Is working at the Yard all you expected?"

The two detectives were off and away. In another moment, they were asking each other about old friends whom they had lost track of since school.

Constable Strikes was much relieved. He had been rather afraid that the clash of the Titans was going to occur in his living room, and he was more thankful than he could say that disaster had been averted. The only thing that was wanting was a nice glass of beer. He felt he deserved it after all he had

been through. Tentatively, he suggested this to Bethancourt.

"Splendid idea," said that young man. "Here, I'll come help you bring it in while those two reminisce."

"We met Miss Carberry on our way over here," said Bethancourt conversationally as he followed Strikes into the pantry. "I take it from what you've told me that Miss Pottlesdon was the leader of the pair?"

"Mostly," said Strikes, handing out bottles of beer. "Miss Carberry sure is a funny one, and she's got odder as she's got older. Yes, I guess you could say Miss Pottlesdon was the leader. She certainly lorded it over her enough—most of the village figured that's why they were such good friends, because Miss Pottlesdon needed a follower."

"And Miss Carberry needed a leader?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I think she genuinely admired Miss Pottlesdon. For all her faults, Miss Pottlesdon had done well for herself, and she was certainly very organized. Miss Carberry, she seems as if her mind's always somewhere else, but she's sharper than you'd think. She can prattle on forever about nothing in particular and then, all of a sudden, she'll come straight to the point, cut right to the heart of

the matter. And she can be stubborn. It's my opinion it wasn't as one-sided a friendship as you might have thought."

"Does everyone like Miss Carberry?"

"Oh, yes. She's a pleasant sort, is Miss Carberry," replied Strikes, getting out a tray and four glasses. "You can put those here, sir. I'll carry out if you'll just get the door."

Gibbons and Daniels were pleasantly surprised at the appearance of the beer. They all toasted each other and, after a few reminiscences about beer-drinking parties during police training, Gibbons, reminded by a look from Bethancourt, broached the subject of the investigation.

"Straightforward as they come," said Daniels immediately. "Wasn't it, Strikes?"

"Yes, sir."

"A couple of the villagers—your Mrs. Padmore included—kicked up such a fuss we'd thought there'd better be an inquiry, but we turned up nothing. Miss Pottlesdon's life was an open book. She was orphaned at seven and brought up by a maiden aunt. Did well in school and went into teaching. No men in her life that we could discover. She was a good teacher, but eventually shifted into administration, where she

excelled. She was made headmistress at Cottelsby at the age of thirty-eight. She went from there to Derrington, and then to Brandeston when she was, oh, say forty-seven or so. It was there that she met our Miss Carberry, and she stayed there until retirement. We talked to all three schools: they all gave her excellent references and said there had never been a breath of anything even vaguely improper, nor any major problems during her tenure. We spoke to several ex-students who universally loathed her, but none of them could remember anything occurring during their years under her that could conceivably lead to murder in her old age. Of course, the village itself is simply crammed with people who might have wanted her out of the way. She was a first-class nuisance."

"But you don't go to the trouble of murdering a nuisance," said Gibbons.

"Exactly. Strikes, what were some of those things you dug up?"

"There was Mrs. Banner, sir. She's never forgiven Miss Pottlesdon for criticizing her table at the fete a few years back. There was a big row and Mrs. Banner just up and quit and nothing the vicar could say would bring her back. The

vicar was that mad, because it made them one short for the tea tent, and Miss Pottlesdon wouldn't do it herself—said her forte was administration, not servants' work. Then there was Mr. Hankin last year at the county fair. He insists to this day that Miss Pottlesdon switched his tomatoes for hers and walked away with the prize.

"To be fair," added Strikes, "I doubt she did any such thing. She wanted to run the village the way she'd run her school, but she was honest."

"That hardly matters," put in Daniels, "so long as Mr. Hankin truly believed she'd done it. And there was a general consensus here that something odd had happened."

"Yes, sir. There were Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher. That was just a couple of months ago. Mr. Fletcher had been having it off with a girl in Thornegarth. Miss Pottlesdon found out about it, and told Mrs. Fletcher. She thought it only right she should know."

Bethancourt whistled softly. "Very indiscreet," he said. "How are the Fletchers nowadays?"

"Well, there was talk of divorce, sir, but they seem to have patched it up now. Anyway, he moved back in about three weeks ago."

Bethancourt nodded. "Anybody else?"

"Only Jeff Mudlake. He's the publican. Miss Pottlesdon turned him in for serving people after hours, and he got a warning and a whopping great fine. All his regulars chipped in to help him pay it."

"Don't forget that boorish young man. What was his name, Strikes?"

"Wes Barton, sir."

"And who was he?" asked Gibbons.

"Young man who apparently got one of Miss Pottlesdon's girls pregnant in her third to last year at Brandeston. The girl and her family were Catholic, so there was no question of abortion. Miss Pottlesdon brought pressure to bear, and the young man was forced into marrying the girl." Daniels shook his head. "It was a terrible mismatch. The girl's family was poor but educated, and this Barton was just a village lad with a way with engines. Worked in the garage in the town. He hadn't the least interest in the girl beyond bedding her, and she was only scared to death and desperate to get married before she gave birth. Well, he turned up here about a week before the accident—his sister lives in the area—and one drunken night in the pub was railing against Miss Pot-

tlesdon for having ruined his life. His wife evidently didn't believe in birth control either and produced another child. When she became pregnant the third time, he insisted she get an abortion. They had a big row, and he left. To tell the truth, the young man's had a hard time trying to make ends meet with a wife and two children."

"But he couldn't have done it?" asked Bethancourt.

"No," said Daniels. "Not exactly. He was still at his sister's when it happened. Actually, none of the people we've mentioned have an alibi, but neither could we get any proof against them, and none of them apparently knows much about mushrooms. And none of them were likely to be invited to dinner at Miss Pottlesdon's."

"That's not altogether true, sir," said Strikes. "Remember, you said any one of them might have been if they'd called up and said they wanted to bury the hatchet. Miss Pottlesdon wasn't vindictive—just particular."

"True," sighed Daniels.

"Did any of them know she had been mushroom-gathering that day?" asked Gibbons.

Strikes grinned. "The whole village knew that, sir. Both she and Miss Carberry had talked of nothing else all week."

"We thought," said Daniels, "that Wes Barton was probably our best bet, only, well, as I said, the lad's not very bright. He can fix a car quick enough, but he's useless for anything else. He couldn't tell a good mushroom from a poisonous one on the best day he ever had. Nor is he clever enough to come up with such an idea—if he'd wanted to kill her, he'd have bashed her over the head with something heavy or else run her over with a car. And even if he, or anyone else, for that matter, had found a poisonous mushroom and chucked it in her basket, she would still have had to miss it while she was washing them up. She always checked them over a second time then. Everyone in the village testified to that."

"Could anyone have added to what was in her basket?" asked Gibbons.

"Oh, yes," replied Daniels. "It was sitting on her back porch all afternoon. I'll run it through for you, if you like. You correct me if I go wrong, Strikes. Let's see. She and Miss Carberry went out after mushrooms at about eleven o'clock that morning. At about one, Miss Carberry was feeling ill and went back alone. Miss Pottlesdon was seen by her neighbor coming back from the forest at about two fifteen. She left

the basket of mushrooms and her gloves on the back porch and went inside. Miss Carberry says she probably had a bath and made herself some tea—that was the usual thing, I gather. Anyway, her neighbor went out about six to call her daughter in and saw Miss Pottlesdon on her porch taking the mushrooms in. Usually, I gather, Miss Carberry would come over for supper, but she was still feeling unwell, and they decided to put it off. She said Miss Pottlesdon told her that she would just put a few mushrooms in the salad and save the rest for their dinner together.” Daniels took a swig of his beer and leaned forward. “Now, here’s the only thing that made me spend as much time on the case as I did. When we went over Miss Pottlesdon’s house, everything from the dinner had been cleared up, but in the dish drainer by the sink, there were two sets of dishes.”

“Just as if she’d had someone in to dinner after all?”

“Exactly. Of course, it proves nothing. The other dishes might have been left from her breakfast. Or she might have taken them out before Miss Carberry called, decided they were dusty or something, and washed them up with the rest.”

“Yes,” sighed Gibbons, who had gotten interested for a mo-

ment. “It’s suggestive, but nothing more.”

“What about money?” asked Bethancourt. “You never mentioned that as a motive.”

Both Daniels and Strikes laughed. “That’s because there wasn’t any,” answered Daniels. “She had her Social Security and her retirement pay, none of which would continue after her death. The only other money she had was a few investments she inherited from her aunt, but they only brought in about a hundred quid a month. Hardly enough to do murder for.”

“No,” agreed Bethancourt regretfully.

“There was Miss Carberry’s niece, sir,” suggested Strikes tentatively.

“Oh, yes,” said Daniels. “I’d forgotten her. She was seen in Thornegarth that day, although she wasn’t supposed to be here and Miss Carberry says she wasn’t. Rumor has it that she recently has been having an affair with a Donald Crans-ton, who has rather a reputation for, well, let’s call it a certain perverseness in his tastes. That may be why her aunt didn’t know of her visit. On the other hand, she may have gone to dinner at Miss Pottlesdon’s in Miss Carberry’s place and been given the job of washing up the mushrooms—she knew

something about it from her aunt. Miss Carberry could be protecting her. However, if she failed to spot the bad one, it's hardly a crime, and the poor girl's had a rough life—I myself would hardly like to have her mistake brought home to her, if indeed it was hers." He stretched his arms above his head, cracking his knuckles as he did so. "So, you see, Jack, it had to be misadventure one way or the other. I don't deny that the mistake might have been the niece's rather than Miss Pottlesdon's, but I think you'll agree that there's hardly any point in torturing her by public exposure. If it was Pam Sullivan, she probably feels bad enough as it is."

"That's so," agreed Gibbons.

Daniels glanced at his watch. "How about some lunch at the pub?" he asked. "I told my wife I'd be back by teatime, but—"

"Wife?" said Gibbons. "I didn't know you'd gotten married."

"Two years ago," replied Daniels with satisfaction. "We're expecting our first in the fall."

"Congratulations! Yes, let's go for lunch—you can fill me in on family life."

Constable Strikes declined to accompany them, pleading his wife's imminent return as an excuse, so they thanked him for

his information and his beer and took their leave. Outside, a fine drizzle had begun. Daniels drove them the short distance to the village center, warning them along the way that the pub was far from being a gastronome's delight but that the sausages weren't too bad, all things considered.

"I hope you weren't too bored, Phillip," said Gibbons as they stood outside the pub after lunch, watching Daniels' car drive away.

"No, no," replied Bethancourt, "not at all. I was picking up the local gossip."

"Hear anything interesting?"

"Just that Wes Barton is a no-gooder and has apparently seduced an eighteen-year-old shop girl named Sally who lives in the village and whose parents are, as yet, unsuspecting. He is still married to his wife, which makes it worse. Also that everyone here has absolute faith in the infallibility of Misses Pottlesdon and Carberry, at least when it comes to mushrooms, and there are now rumors circulating to the effect that Wes Barton tried to poison both of them. I would have more faith in that rumor," he added, "if it hadn't arisen directly on the heels of the news about young Sally."

"Well, yes," said Gibbons, "but Phillip, if Miss Pottlesdon had found out about this Sally and was threatening to make Barton provide for the girl or to tell her parents, it gives him an excellent motive for putting her out of the way."

Bethancourt shrugged. "You heard Daniels. The lad's not bright and besides, it still leaves how Miss Pottlesdon missed that mushroom when she was washing them up."

"Not really," said Gibbons.

"Not really? What do you mean, 'Not really'?"

"Well, I didn't like to say anything in front of old Daniels, but that's all bosh. If Miss Carberry's right, and Miss Pottlesdon used the mushrooms in the salad, then anyone who was dining with her could have brought the bad one in with them and tossed it into the salad. Of course, they would then have to avoid eating it themselves, but I imagine that could be managed without too much trouble."

Bethancourt was staring at his friend. "Jack, old man," he said, "you're brilliant. I never once thought of that."

"Of course," added Gibbons hastily, feeling that he might have been unduly encouraging, "there's still your first point: that Barton wouldn't know a poisonous mushroom if he

tripped over it. Altogether, I'm afraid it still looks like an accident."

"Yes," mused his friend. "Yes, it does, rather. But," he added, cheering, "at least there are one or two things to be followed up. We'd best get on to Miss Carberry's."

"It might be better," pointed out Gibbons, "to visit Wes Barton's sister, or look in on the Fletchers. Those are the best motives."

"But we told Miss Carberry we'd be there," said Bethancourt. "We can't possibly disappoint her. Supposing she sent out for spirits?"

Gibbons grinned. "That's true," he said. "Very well, the others can wait."

"Besides," added Bethancourt, leading the way, "she can take us over Miss Pottlesdon's cottage. She has the key."

"I'd forgotten that," replied Gibbons. "Look, Phillip, is that an oak?"

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow at his friend. "Birch," he said shortly.

Miss Carberry welcomed them in a flustered manner. She was the sort of spinster who seemed half afraid of men, and having them in her cottage was clearly un-

usual for her. Bethancourt and Gibbons felt like bulls in a china shop. Bethancourt, in particular, was almost a foot taller than Miss Carberry, his head only missing the ceiling beams by inches, and she gazed up at him as though he were somebody else's large and aggressive Alsatian.

Marzipan, on the other hand, was completely unintimidated. He barked strenuously at Cerberus, who ignored him, until Miss Carberry scooped him up and pushed him into another room, firmly closing the door on him. The barking, however, did not cease and Bethancourt, over Miss Carberry's protestations, ordered Cerberus to wait outside on the porch. Marzipan, released from confinement, quieted down and went running about in search of his foe, who seemed to him to have disappeared in the most unaccountable way.

The cottage was quite small and very homey. They were ushered into the little living room and introduced to Miss Carberry's niece. The reason for Daniels' comment concerning her probable lover's perverseness, which had seemed uncalled for at the time, now immediately became obvious. Her right leg had been amputated below the knee, and a crutch leaned against her

chair. For the rest, she was a plain, thin woman with a tired, careworn face. She looked older than she was, and Bethancourt remembered that Daniels had said her life had been a hard one.

She greeted them quietly while Miss Carberry shooed them into seats and then scurried out to fetch the tea tray.

"Pam told me," she said, pausing anxiously on the threshold, "that you would like tea. A proper tea, I mean, even though it's early."

"We love tea," Bethancourt assured her.

"We hardly drink anything else," added Gibbons.

Miss Carberry, reassured, departed.

Pam Sullivan looked after her. "Poor dear," she said. "It's been awfully difficult for her. She and Nan were together so much of the time that now she hardly knows what to do with herself. And Nan was really the planner—Aunt Dottie's not used to planning for herself."

"We're sorry to come dredging it all up again," said Gibbons.

She smiled at him. "Oh, no," she said. "That won't bother her. Now that Nan's gone, she loves to talk about her. Only," her face fell, "I'm afraid she isn't going to last very long. The only way she cheers herself

up is by reminding herself that she'll soon die, too."

"She looks fairly robust to me," said Bethancourt.

Pam glanced at him, surprised. "But she hasn't got long to live," she said. "Didn't you know? She's got a brain tumor—it was diagnosed a few months ago. She's fine now, but the doctors say it will be a year at most before she'll have to be hospitalized, and the end will come soon after that. It's inoperable, you see."

"I'm very sorry," said Bethancourt. "We didn't know."

She shrugged. "It's common knowledge in the village," she said, and then ceased talking as Miss Carberry returned bearing a large tray. There were scones, and cucumber sandwiches, and a variety of homemade biscuits. Gibbons eyed it all (lunch at the pub had not been very satisfying) and tried to forget what the scales had told him the last time he weighed himself.

Miss Carberry poured out, watching them anxiously, and pressing the food on them. Then, all at once, she sat back with her own cup and said, "So I expect you want to hear about Nan. Or did you just want to go over to her cottage? I have the keys, you know, although I haven't got very far with clearing it out. It doesn't seem to

matter somehow." She sighed. "It's all so different from the way we thought it would be."

"You're Miss Pottlesdon's heir, I take it?" asked Bethancourt.

"Oh, yes. And she was mine until I found Pam here. I changed my will then, with Nan's knowledge, of course. Not that either of us had much to leave, beyond our furniture and things. We always thought," she added sadly, "that she'd go first. She was older than me, you see, and not in as good health."

"But Aunt," said Pam gently, "she did go first."

Miss Carberry looked a little startled. "Oh, yes, so she did. I almost forget sometimes—I was so worried, you see, when I found out about my tumor, that she'd have no one to care for her after I was gone."

"I would have done my best," said Pam reproachfully. "You know that, Aunt. You made me promise."

"Well, of course, dear, but you have to work, don't you? And you don't live here. It wouldn't have been the same thing at all."

"We understand that the two of you usually went to gather mushrooms together," said Bethancourt.

"Oh, yes," answered Miss Carberry. "My mother always

had wild mushrooms when I was a child, and when I retired here, I took it up again. Yes, Nan and I made quite a little ceremony out of it every spring. We'd go out and take our lunch with us and spend the day in the woods. Then we'd come back and have supper with champagne, using the mushrooms. We'd do the same in the fall, when we went for the last pickings of the year. It was very pleasant."

"This was your first trip this spring then?"

"Yes." She nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes, the first really nice spring day it was. We always waited for a nice, sunny day. We got a good batch. But then my head started aching, and I couldn't keep up. Nan almost came back with me, but then she thought she'd just go a little farther. It was early yet, you see." Miss Carberry looked woeful. "She must have gotten tired after I left and was careless with the last group. It must have been the last group. It's then, you see, when you're thinking of going home, that you might not pay such good attention. She must have thought that she'd check them over better when she was cleaning them."

"But then why didn't she do that?" asked Gibbons.

"I can't imagine," said Miss

Carberry. "Really, it was extraordinarily careless of her, and Nan was not a careless person as a rule. Her eyes had been giving her a bit of trouble lately, especially when she was tired. Perhaps that was it."

"Tell me," said Bethancourt, "if she had looked the mushrooms over very carefully while picking them, might she have not bothered to check them very well later? I mean, since she was rushed?"

"She might," admitted Miss Carberry. "But she couldn't have checked very carefully in the first place, could she? If she had, there wouldn't have been a bad one in the basket, would there? Oh, I see. You think someone chucked a bad one in while the basket was on the porch. But really, that's too silly. I know Nan wasn't as well-liked here as she deserved, but no one would have killed her. After all, she always acted from the best of intentions, and everyone knew that, even if they didn't like the consequences."

"What about you, Miss Carberry? Did you approve of her actions?"

"Nan was terribly organized," said Miss Carberry. "I always admired her for that because of course, I'm not organized myself at all. She liked to have things tidied up, details

seen to, and so on. At heart she was still a headmistress. She felt responsible. Are you quite certain, Mr. Bethancourt, that your dog is all right out there?"

"He's just fine, Miss Carberry. Having a nap, I expect."

"Dogs are terribly hardy, aren't they?" she said. "I know Mr. Bates's farm dog sleeps outside in all kinds of weather and never seems any the worse for it. I don't think, though, that Marzipan would ever really take to it."

"No," said Bethancourt, "I shouldn't recommend it for the smaller breeds."

"Well," she said, setting her teacup aside, "I expect you'd like to see Nan's place now. That is, if you've quite finished your tea? Certain you won't take anything more? Then I'll just get my coat. Pam, you keep Marzipan in here—and don't bother to clear away. I'll do that when I get back."

"Yes, Aunt," said Pam with a smile that indicated she had no intention of following this advice.

"I worry about that girl," said Miss Carberry once they were safely outside, having eluded the vigilant Marzipan. "She always will do too much, even when she's here and supposed to be resting. Nan's cottage is down this way, just round the bend."

"You mentioned 'finding' your niece, Miss Carberry?" asked Bethancourt, motioning to Cerberus to follow them.

"My, isn't he well-behaved. Not at all like Marzipan. Nan always said I spoiled him too much. She said people like me shouldn't be allowed to keep animals."

"You didn't mind that?"

Miss Carberry seemed surprised. "Why should I?" she asked. "She was entitled to her opinion. In any case, she was right in a way. Marzipan has never behaved. Actually, she found me."

"She?" asked Bethancourt, confused. "I thought Marzipan was a male dog."

"Not Marzipan. My niece. She wrote me a very nice letter when she got out of hospital. After the operation, you know, on her leg. I didn't even know I had a niece."

"You weren't close with your family, then?"

"It's a very sad story," said Miss Carberry. "And a rather long one. Do you really want to hear about it or are you just being polite? It has nothing to do with Nan, you know."

"I'd be very interested," replied Bethancourt. Gibbons said nothing. He had fallen a little behind them, watching a chipmunk, and wasn't listening.

"I'll make it brief, then," said Miss Carberry. "I had very strict parents, and I'm afraid I was never spirited enough to gainsay them. My sister was the spirited one—she was always in trouble, but I just couldn't stand all the fuss. Anyway, when I was about eighteen, I met a young man and fell madly in love with him. He wasn't a very nice young man, as it turned out, but I wasn't to know that then. He wanted to marry me, but my parents absolutely forbade it. I was foolish enough to bow to their wishes and break my engagement. Well, can you guess what happened next?" She stopped and looked at Bethancourt with a bright eye.

Bethancourt had just lit a cigarette; he had felt smoking somehow inappropriate in Miss Carberry's home. He tucked the lighter back into his jacket pocket and said, "My guess would be that your sister ran off with him instead."

Miss Carberry laughed. "You're a very good guesser," she said. "That's exactly right. My parents disowned her and forbade me to ever communicate with her again. I might have gone behind their backs that time, but I was very hurt by what she had done. She knew, you see, how much I had loved him myself."

"So you never saw her again?"

"No. Evidently he took her abroad and, about four years later, abandoned her for another woman. Pam was three then. My sister continued to live abroad and went into service, not being qualified for anything else. Only I'm afraid she wasn't very good at that, either. At any rate, Pam speaks of several moves in her early years. Then, when she was about eight, my sister died. No one knew the child had relatives in England, so she was put into an orphanage in France. I gather it wasn't a very pleasant place."

Bethancourt exhaled and watched the wind take the smoke away. "How did she end up back here then?"

"She married an Englishman," replied Miss Carberry. "They moved back to England and had a son, and it was then that Pam began trying to track down her family here. It wasn't easy, but she had finally found out where I was when the car accident happened. Both her son and her husband were killed, and her right leg was crushed. She'd been working as a cleaning woman, but that was out of the question with only one leg. So she found a job in a factory where she can sit down to her work, although I

gather it's not a very nice job. Repetitive, she says, and very long hours. And I'm afraid my pension won't stretch to two."

Bethancourt was reflective. "You're right," he said in a moment. "That's a very sad story."

They had rounded the bend in the lane. The land sloped downward here, and at the bottom of the hill stood two houses, separated from each other by a high hedge. The houses looked out across a meadow, and thence to the forest, which loomed up all about them here.

"That's Nan's place," said Miss Carberry, indicating the nearer house. "I found it for her when I went to rent my own cottage. This one was more expensive, but then Nan's pension was larger than mine. It was nice for us, being so close."

Bethancourt was peering at the meadow. "Is that—oh, I see. It's a little girl."

"Susan Thelgarth," supplied Miss Carberry. "She's always playing out there, or in the forest itself. Her mother really doesn't keep enough watch on her; Nan spoke to her about it several times, and warned her that the forest could be dangerous. We took her out last year and showed her the mushrooms so she shouldn't eat a bad one by mistake. Where's your Mr. Gibbons got to?"

Bethancourt looked around.

"He's probably trying to find an oak," he muttered. "Jack! Jack, hurry up!"

In a moment, Gibbons came round the bend, holding a wildflower in his hand. He waved, and trotted to join them on the porch.

"Here I am," he said. "Just stopped to pick a flower. Pretty, isn't it?"

"Very," said Bethancourt curtly. "This was Miss Pottlesdon's house. Is this the back porch where the mushrooms were, Miss Carberry? It seems like the front to me."

"No, no," said Miss Carberry, producing a key and inserting it in the lock. "This is the back. It opens on the kitchen, you see. Here we are."

This cottage was considerably larger than Miss Carberry's. They entered a spacious kitchen in which everything was neat as a pin.

"She used to sit here," said Miss Carberry, indicating a small table set before the window, "for her morning coffee and breakfast. The dining room is through here." She led the way through a door in the farther wall that opened directly on a small dining room filled by a polished dinner table centered beneath the overhead lamp and a matching sideboard against one wall. Again, nothing was out of place. The can-

dles on the table were new ones, each glass and plate in the sideboard's glass-fronted cabinet was precisely placed, and the six matching chairs were centered, their seats pushed neatly under the table.

A second doorway at the end of the room led into a small foyer and, beyond, to the living room. A chintz-covered sofa and two easy chairs were grouped about the fireplace, and the walls were lined with books. Here there was some disorder. A large cardboard box stood open on the floor, and there was a wide gap in the bookshelves.

"It's all I've managed to do so far," said Miss Carberry apologetically. "The books seemed easiest to start with, but I haven't done very much all the same."

She looked mournfully at the long rows.

They returned to the foyer and followed Miss Carberry up the stairs. At the head of the stairs was the bathroom, and to either side was a bedroom. The one on the left was the larger and had been Miss Pottlesdon's. A small leather jewel case and a box of tissues sat on the bureau, which was covered by an old fashioned cloth. There was a lamp on the bedside table as well as a bottle of aspirin and a copy of *Silas*

Marner. Otherwise, the bedroom was as bare of character as the rest of the house.

The second bedroom was clearly kept as a guest room, which Miss Carberry confirmed. It was even less informative, if that was possible, than the other rooms.

"Miss Carberry," said Bethancourt, "have you tidied up much since Miss Pottlesdon was hospitalized?"

"No," she answered. "I emptied out the refrigerator, of course, and put away the dishes in the drainer, but other than that, I haven't touched a thing. Except for the books downstairs. And I took her bath salts, as I was running out. Oh, and the toothpaste. It was a new tube and I thought it might as well be put to use. I mean, it's all mine now, to do with as I wish. Only," she added with a certainly melancholy, "I don't seem to want to do much of anything with it. It all just seems so—so worthless, now she's gone."

"I do understand how you must feel," said Bethancourt sympathetically.

"Still," she sighed, "it's all got to be cleared out. The owners will want to let the house again, and I can hardly leave it all for Pam to do when I'm gone. You two look around. As long as I'm here, I might as well

put some more of those blighted books into boxes."

She moved off toward the stairs, leaving the two young men alone in the bedroom.

"Not much here, is there?" said Gibbons, opening the closet and finding an orderly array of clothes neatly hung and four pairs of shoes all in a row along the floor.

"I've never seen anyone this maniacally neat before," agreed Bethancourt, pulling out the bedside table's drawers one after another. "If I see one more thing correctly in its place, I shall scream."

"It's hardly a home at all," said Gibbons, abandoning the closet and gazing out of the window. "Usually you get a feeling for a person from their things, but this place could be a showroom. There's really nothing personal at all here."

"Probably comes of having lived in institutions her whole life," said Bethancourt.

"Not necessarily. Miss Carberry's home was pleasant enough. Not exactly my taste, but very comfortable and homey."

"True, but Miss Pottlesdon seems to have been quite a different sort from her friend. She was a born headmistress, if you ask me."

Gibbons turned from the window and grinned. "You

sound quite venomous, Phillip. Did you have some problems with a headmistress in your schooldays?"

Bethancourt shrugged. "A few," he answered. "Here, let's go downstairs and look at the books. There's nothing here."

In the living room, Miss Carberry was taking the books from the shelves without so much as glancing at their titles and placing them carefully in the cardboard box. She moved slowly, and there was a curious kind of hopelessness about her movements, as though she were digging a hole that she expected to be filling back in shortly.

Bethancourt politely offered his assistance, but she declined, pausing in her work to rest against one of the armchairs.

"I'm sure you have better things to do," she said. "Detecting, and all that. After all, it's why you came, isn't it? And besides, this is my little job. It's the least I can do for Nan. In the normal way of things, she'd have been doing it for me, only, of course, she would have had it done by now." Miss Carberry sighed. "She was so decisive. I've never been very decisive myself."

"Uh, Miss Carberry," interrupted Gibbons, "we did just want to ask you: what became

of the rest of the mushrooms?"

"The rest of the mushrooms?" repeated Miss Carberry, vaguely. "What mushrooms?"

"The mushrooms you and Miss Pottlesdon had gathered that day," said Bethancourt patiently.

"Oh, I found them in the refrigerator when I came by next day. You know, after she'd been taken to hospital. I came round to make sure there was nothing spoiling and to change the bed linens for when she came home. I thought at the time that she would be—oh, never mind that," she added, impatient with herself.

"So you threw them out?" asked Gibbons.

"Oh, no." She shook her head. "They'd only been picked the day before and were still quite fresh. I took them home."

"And ate them?" asked Bethancourt, scandalized.

Miss Carberry shot him a shrewd look. "Well, I checked them over first, of course," she said. "I'm not yet senile. But they were all quite all right. Nan must have gotten the only bad one."

"Yes," said Bethancourt, who was glancing over the books on the shelves. "I suppose it would be extraordinary if she made more than one mistake."

"It certainly would." Miss Carberry nodded energetically.

The books were all alphabetized by author, the fiction separated from the nonfiction, and the nonfiction broken up by subject.

"There are quite a few on mushrooms here. Mushrooms and gardening," said Bethancourt.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Carberry. "Nan was quite an expert. I taught her at first, you know, the way my mother had taught me. But once she became truly interested, she had to research it all, and learn all sorts of extra things. She was like that, if she was interested in a subject. In the end, she knew a great deal more than I did about mushrooms."

"Perhaps," said Bethancourt, "your own knowledge, learned in childhood and therefore more instinctive, is also more reliable."

"It seems," said Miss Carberry sadly, "as if that were so."

The fine rain had stopped, and away to the east there was a patch of blue sky. Gibbons looked at it appreciatively.

"It looks as though it's going to be a fine night," he observed.

"Yes," agreed Bethancourt meditatively. "I think perhaps the best thing to do now is check in with Natalie Padmore. We can gather gossip about the Fletchers and Wes Barton from

her, and wangle an introduction."

"Yes," said Gibbons reluctantly. "Or we could visit the scene of the crime."

Bethancourt stared at him. "I was under the impression," he said, "that we had just done that."

"I put it badly," said Gibbons hastily. "I meant, have a look at the woods and mushrooms themselves. Woods," he added, "always seem to smell particularly good after a rain."

"Jack," said Bethancourt severely, "you have been cooped up in London entirely too long."

"It's only teatime," said Gibbons persuasively.

Bethancourt sighed. "Very well," he said. "I can see you won't be able to concentrate until you've breathed deeply in a damp forest. We can cut across the meadow. Cerberus, come."

They started off, making their way through the thick grass, their trouser legs getting thoroughly soaked in the process. Cerberus bounded ahead, running back occasionally to check on them, and then racing forward again. Suddenly, as he reached the eaves of the forest, he drew up abruptly and stood, wagging his tail gently.

"I wonder what he's found?" asked Gibbons, vaguely curious.

"I don't—oh, Lord," replied

Bethancourt. "It must be that little girl."

He sprinted ahead, expecting to find a child cowering against a tree trunk. Cerberus, being considerable larger than most children, often provoked this response despite the best of intentions, and Bethancourt was only thankful that this particular child did not appear to be a screamer.

Neither was she afraid of the dog. She was indeed standing before a tree trunk, but both hands were buried in the Borzoi's fur behind his ears, and she was cooing softly to him. She looked up as Bethancourt approached, and said, a little guardedly, "Hello."

"Hello," responded a much-relieved Bethancourt, coming to a halt.

There was an awkward pause. "I was afraid," said Bethancourt, "that he might have frightened you."

She gave him a scornful look. "He's beautiful," she said firmly. "What's his name?"

"Cerberus."

"Cerberus," she repeated carefully, and the dog's tail waved at the sound of his name. "That's a funny name."

Bethancourt squatted down beside her. "It's from Greek mythology," he said. "Cerberus was the name of the three-headed dog who guarded the

gates of Hades. That was their name for hell."

This information did not appear to raise her opinion of Bethancourt. She petted the dog more firmly, as if to make up for the neglect he must certainly endure by being owned by a madman, and said, "What on earth did you want to name him that for?"

Bethancourt smiled. "Odd sense of humor, I suppose. Your name is Susan, isn't it? Miss Carberry pointed you out to us as we came down."

She nodded. "And you're Mrs. Padmore's detectives. Jason told me all about you. You're from Scotland Yard."

"No," replied Bethancourt. "Only my friend works there. I just help him out occasionally. I'm Phillip Bethancourt."

"It's very nice to meet you," she replied automatically, her attention on the dog.

"Perhaps you could help us with our detecting," said Bethancourt ingratiatingly. "You play around here quite often, don't you?"

"Yes." She did not appear to be very interested in this proposition. "I live here," she added.

"Of course," said Bethancourt. "Tell me, do you remember the day Miss Pottlesdon and Miss Carberry went out for mushrooms?"

"Yes." She shifted her atten-

tion to Cerberus' chest, and the great dog sat down, panting happily at her.

"Did you see them?"

"I saw them start off. I didn't see them in the forest later."

"Did you see anyone else around here that day?"

"Of course." She spared him a glance. "It was a nice, sunny day. Lots of people come out then. I like it better when I'm alone."

"Naturally so," agreed Bethancourt. "Will you tell me who you saw?"

This, her look seemed to say, was just like a grownup. They came along and interrupted you and asked you a lot of pointless questions.

"It would really be a big help," said Bethancourt persuasively.

"Nobody in the morning. In the afternoon there were lots of people. Jason came by after lunch. I found Mr. Banks in the forest. Quite far in. He was looking for birds' nests, but I wouldn't show him any."

"Quite right," said Bethancourt stoutly.

"Hello," said Gibbons, coming up.

"You're the Scotland Yard man," said Susan, showing more interest in him than she had in his friend.

"Yes," admitted Gibbons, not in the least taken aback by this

abrupt form of address. "My name's Gibbons."

"I'm Susan," she said. "Pleased to meet you."

"Susan was just telling me who else was wandering in this part of the forest the day Miss Pottlesdon was taken ill," Bethancourt told his friend. "Do please go on, Susan."

"There was Sally Barnes and that new young man of hers."

Bethancourt and Gibbons exchanged glances.

"Do you mean Wes Barton?" asked Bethancourt. "The man who came to visit his sister?"

Susan nodded. "That's the one. They had a picnic in the meadow, farther down that way. Then they came into the woods and hid behind some bushes. I suppose they thought nobody would find them there, but they didn't go nearly far enough in for that. Mrs. Canfield passed close by and heard them and made me come away. She said it wasn't nice to spy on people."

"Neither is it," said Bethancourt.

She regarded him seriously. "I thought that's what detectives do," she said.

"No," said Gibbons. "Detectives mostly ask questions, like us. Do you remember what time Sally and Wes were here?"

"Do you get beaten up a lot?" she asked, ignoring his ques-

tion. "Detectives on the telly always do."

"No," replied Gibbons. "Real detectives don't get beaten up in the normal way of things."

"Oh." She seemed to consider this for a moment and then, shrugging it off, returned to the previous subject. "They were here about teatime. I saw them going off later, when I was talking to Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher. That was about six o'clock, I suppose. Anyway, it got dark soon after, and I had to go in."

"The Fletchers were here as well?"

"Yes. They came for a walk before supper. They often do when it's nice. Sometimes they drop in on Mum and have a drink."

Again, the two young men exchanged glances.

"Did you see any of these people go near Miss Pottlesdon's cottage?" asked Gibbons.

"No."

"You mean they didn't, or that you didn't see?"

"I didn't see. I wasn't looking and, anyway, you can't see the cottage so well from here. Not unless you're in a tree."

"I see."

Susan gave Cerberus a final pat and looked up at Gibbons. "Do you want to see some mushrooms?" she asked. "I can tell the difference. Miss Pottlesdon taught me. I can show

you which are the good ones and which are the bad."

Gibbons smiled. "That sounds very interesting," he said.

"Come along then."

Without further ado, she turned and moved off between the trees, Gibbons following behind her. Bethancourt quickly scrambled to his feet and went after them, Cerberus bounding ahead once again.

Susan led the way confidently. There was a path, but she diverged from this regularly, trampling over the bracken and pushing her way through bushes. All about them, the tree trunks, both slender and wide, were dark with the wet, making the first, pale green leaves even paler in comparison. The boughs stretched above them, dripping on their heads and obscuring Bethancourt's glasses. These he finally removed and was immediately reduced to squinting.

"Here," said Susan, stopping abruptly. She crouched down at the foot of an old birch and pushed away some dead leaves, revealing a patch of fungi. The men joined her on the ground and peered intently at this find, discovering in the process that what had appeared to be all one crop was in fact several distinct clumps.

"There were more," said Susan, "but I picked some of them for Miss Pottlesdon the other day."

"These would be the good ones, then?" asked Gibbons.

"Some are. Some aren't. Here, I'll show you if you like."

She scrutinized the mushrooms fiercely for a few moments and then reached out and plucked several from the earth. She sat back on her haunches and glared at the roots, brushing away the dirt with her fingers.

"There," she said, handing one bunch to Gibbons. "Those are the good ones. This here is a poisonous one."

Gibbons turned them over in his hand. "You said you picked some for Miss Pottlesdon," he said. "When was that?"

"That day," she answered. "I put them in her basket with the others. There were only a few, just to be polite."

"That was nice of you," said Bethancourt. "Did you always add to what she'd gathered?"

Susan shrugged. "Most times. Mum won't let me bring them home." She was starting off between the trees, watching Cerberus running after a squirrel. Suddenly she turned back to them and announced, "I've got to go. It's teatime."

"Just a moment," said Gibbons. He had pulled out his

handkerchief and was carefully wrapping up the mushrooms she had handed him. "Where's the poisonous one?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you want that for?"

"I want to compare them."

She considered this and then bent and recaptured the one she had cast aside. "Well, don't go mixing them up and eating them," she warned.

"I won't," promised Gibbons. "In fact, I won't eat any of them. Just a very scientific comparison."

She nodded and turned away without further comment, moving swiftly off between the trees.

The two young men rose more slowly and began to make their own way back, Bethancourt calling to the dog to follow. They were silent for a moment, and then, "Do you think that's what happened, Jack?" asked Bethancourt, disturbed.

"I don't know," replied Gibbons. "I think we'd better find Miss Carberry and have this sample vetted by her."

"Yes," agreed Bethancourt. "Yes, that's a good idea."

It was dark by the time they emerged from the woods, and even Gibbons was beginning to think less kindly of country life. They had followed the wrong path for quite a distance

before they realized their mistake, and then it had taken them some time to find the correct path. Indeed, in the gathering dusk they might not have found it at all, had not Cerberus decided he was hungry and begun heading for home. By the time they found themselves tramping back across the meadow, they were cold, damp, and weary. But there was a light burning in Miss Pottlesdon's window, and they dutifully made their way back to the cottage.

Miss Carberry was just preparing to leave, having spent the afternoon packing books. She appeared a little surprised to see the two detectives back so soon, but obligingly let them in and looked over their mushrooms under the kitchen lamp. She examined them one by one, turning them over with her strong, blunt fingers, setting each one aside with a muttered, "Good."

"That's the lot, then," she said, looking up at them. "You must know more about mushrooms than you let on. They're all perfectly edible."

"Here's one escaped in my pocket," said Gibbons, producing the reputedly poisonous mushroom. He put it down with the others, but Miss Carberry immediately rescued it and held it under the light. Almost

at once, she shook her head.

"Well, perhaps you just had good luck," she said. "This is a bad one. Just because you found it with the others doesn't mean a thing. They often grow quite close together." She rose briskly and disposed of it in the trash bin.

"Actually," said Bethancourt, "we didn't find them at all. The little girl, Susan, helped us."

Miss Carberry looked considerably startled. "Susan?" she said. "But she wouldn't have missed the bad one. Susan's very good and very careful. She's brought Nan and me mushrooms she's picked herself many times, and there's never been a bad one in the lot."

Gibbons grinned ruefully. "I did just pick one or two," he said. "And we weren't sure how reliable Susan was, so we thought you'd better have a look at them before we ate them."

"Oh," Miss Carberry was relieved. "No, Susan's quite reliable, although you were wise to come along to me. It's much better to have two opinions if you don't know anything yourself."

They thanked her for her help and then, business concluded, they watched her lock up and accompanied her up the road to her own house, shiv-

ering and unable to warm up going at Miss Carberry's slow pace. They left her at the gate and then hastened along, pausing only to discard the mushrooms into the nearest copse.

"**T**here they are," said Natalie Padmore, nodding in the direction of the bar.

It was nine o'clock, and the single room of the village pub was quite full. Bethancourt and Gibbons, with Mrs. Padmore, were settled against the far wall, which gave them an excellent view of anybody coming in the door. Gibbons had had his faith in country life reinstated by a hot bath, dry clothes, and a solid supper at a restaurant in Thornegarth. He was now thoroughly enjoying his after-supper pint in the cosy atmosphere of the pub. Bethancourt, on the settle, had leaned back with his usual air of contentment and was smoking and sipping in a manner that indicated he could not possibly have been any more comfortable in his own living room. Mrs. Padmore sat between them, toying with a glass of sherry and occasionally brushing a strand of hair back from her face.

They had been there for a quarter of an hour or so, mak-

ing desultory conversation. There was a slight constraint among them, caused in equal parts by the facts that Gibbons found Mrs. Padmore very attractive and would have liked to indulge in some light flirtation; that Mrs. Padmore, since her husband was absent for the weekend, would also have enjoyed a bit of flirting, but wanted to flirt with Bethancourt; and that Bethancourt was preoccupied with his own thoughts and was not attracted to the lady in any case. Taken all in all, it was not a situation fraught with possibilities.

The pub had been Mrs. Padmore's suggestion. She had demurred at calling on the Fletchers with her two detectives in tow. She felt it was tantamount to accusing them of murdering Miss Pottlesdon, and she really didn't think they had. Besides, a slight rift had occurred in her relations with them when she had supported Miss Pottlesdon's actions in the matter of Mr. Fletcher's infidelity.

Mrs. Padmore liked Marjorie Fletcher and knew her to be happy in her marriage. She was therefore incensed at Mr. Fletcher's deception. She would never have had the courage herself to say anything to Marjorie, knowing how it would hurt her, but she was certainly

glad that Mr. Fletcher's extramarital activities had been sharply curtailed. With such a loving and devoted wife, she could not imagine what he had been thinking of.

To the two young men with her, the explanation leapt to mind as soon as they saw the couple enter. The Fletchers were in their mid-forties, but Mr. Fletcher had kept his figure whereas his wife had not. He was a slim man of upright carriage who, in addition, was the possessor of one of those boyish faces that actually gain attractiveness in middle age when life has left some marks of character upon them. Marjorie Fletcher, on the other hand, had gained weight with her years and let her hair become streaked with grey. The lines that gave her husband's face character merely made hers look old. However, in spite of all this, she had clearly made an effort to look nice: she was smartly dressed, her hair was freshly cut, and she had applied her makeup skillfully. Bethancourt was willing to bet that most of these improvements had been embarked on after the revelation of her husband's indiscretion.

He was watching them as they placed their orders and were handed their drinks, wondering how on earth he was go-

ing to make contact with them in a place where it would be so simple for them to avoid him. It had been his chief concern about the pub suggestion all along, but he might as well have been easy about it. Just as he was wondering whether he could rouse Cerberus from his position beneath the table and somehow get him to nip Mrs. Fletcher's behind or raise a leg on Mr. Fletcher's trousers, they turned and came in his direction. They were looking for seats, of which there were few left, when Mrs. Padmore rose and attracted their attention. She invited them to join her party, motioning toward the two empty stools at the other side of the table, and the Fletchers were caught. Considering the absence of any other two seats together, they could not refuse without its seeming pointed and rather rude. They sat down with the best grace they could manage and pretended to be delighted to make Bethancourt's and Gibbons' acquaintance.

"I'm so glad we ran into you," said Bethancourt, after his dog had been admired and his relationship to Mrs. Padmore and hers to his sister had been dissected. "Jack and I were just thinking this afternoon that you might be able to help us with our inquiry." Mr.

Fletcher's brows began to beetle at this, and Mrs. Fletcher looked nervous, but Bethancourt went on smoothly. "You see, we understand Wes Barton was seen in the meadow across from Miss Pottlesdon's cottage the afternoon she was taken ill. Susan said she was talking to you when she saw him leave, but she didn't see where he went. We thought perhaps you might have noticed."

Mr. Fletcher's brow cleared, but Mrs. Fletcher looked perplexed and said, "Wes Barton? But I didn't see him at all. Did you, Ron?"

"That Susan has eyes like a hawk," said Fletcher admiringly. "No, I didn't notice him."

"Then there was no one on the road or near the cottage while you were returning?"

"There was Ben Banks," said Mrs. Fletcher. "We walked back with him. I didn't see anyone else."

"That might be suspicious in itself," remarked Gibbons. "According to Susan, Wes and Sally Barnes left just before you did, so by all rights you should have seen them ahead of you in the lane."

Fletcher laughed. "Not if he had Sally with him," he said. "He'd hardly parade her through the village on his arm."

"Someone might tell Sally's

parents, you see," said Mrs. Fletcher.

"They were skulking about together like thieves," agreed Mrs. Padmore. "No, if they'd seen anyone about, they'd have been off the road like a shot. Especially since—well, in view of what they probably went to the forest for in the first place." She cast an arch glance at Bethancourt, who did not notice.

"That's true," he said, meditatively. "I hadn't thought of that."

The topic of illicit love did not sit well with the Fletchers. They both appeared uncomfortable and looked down at their drinks.

"It's a pity you can't help us," said Gibbons tactfully. "I don't expect you noticed anything, well, unusual about Miss Pottlesdon's cottage? Well, no," he added, as they shook their heads, "of course you would already have told the police if you had."

"They hardly asked," said Mrs. Fletcher bitterly. Mr. Fletcher looked at her, a little alarmed, but she did not continue and an awkward pause ensued.

"Well," said Bethancourt, setting down his empty glass, "I think another trip to the bar is indicated. No, it's all right—I'll stand this round."

"I'll come and help you carry," offered Gibbons.

"No, no," said Fletcher, unexpectedly. "Let me."

Accordingly, the two men rose and made their way to the bar.

"You and your friend seem rather young," said Fletcher while Bethancourt tried to attract the attention of the barmaid. "For detectives, I mean," he added. "Marjorie and I were expecting someone older."

"Everyone has to start sometime," replied Bethancourt serenely, signaling in vain above the heads of several regulars planted firmly at the bar. "Inspector Daniels," he pointed out, "isn't much older."

"No," admitted Fletcher.

"Your wife didn't seem to care much for him."

"No," said Fletcher again. "Well, he made some insinuations..." His voice trailed off, and he gazed at Bethancourt indecisively. That young man had momentarily given up on the barmaid and was staring pathetically after her as she busied herself at the opposite end of the bar. "Look here," said Fletcher, making up his mind. "Marjorie's had a bad time of it lately, and I'd rather she wasn't upset any further. I expect you've heard about the trouble we had. That Daniels seemed to think we'd poisoned

Miss Pottlesdon for revenge, but neither of us felt like that at all."

"No?" asked Bethancourt, looking round at him. "What did you feel like?"

Fletcher grinned. "Mostly like a heel," he replied. "But honestly, I admit when Marjorie threw me out, I might have thought of taking it out on the old cat. I certainly called her a lot of names. But after Marjorie and I began to work things out, neither of us had time to think of revenge. We were too busy thinking about each other."

"Naturally so," agreed Bethancourt. "So you—oh, look, here we are. You were having lager, weren't you? Two pints of lager, two of bitter, and a sherry, please." He turned back to Fletcher while their order was being filled. "So you weren't particularly angry about having to end your liaison?" he asked bluntly.

Fletcher looked away. "No," he answered. "I was disappointed in a way—she was a very pretty girl. But really, it was almost a relief. I had begun to feel very badly about Marjorie, you see. I suppose," he added, suddenly belligerent, "you think I'm a heel, too."

"Not at all," replied Bethancourt, paying the barmaid. "I think everyone makes mistakes. And perhaps it wasn't

such a bad mistake, at that."

"What do you mean?" asked Fletcher, to whom this line of thought was clearly a new one.

"Well," said Bethancourt, passing over two mugs of beer, "would you say your marriage has improved since your reconciliation?"

"Certainly. It's been wonderful since we worked things out—almost like a whole new beginning."

"There you are then."

Fletcher was silent as they made their way back to the table. As they approached it, he paused, cocked an eye at Bethancourt, and asked, "Are you married?"

Bethancourt grinned. "No," he answered.

"I still don't think it looks very good," said Gibbons, pulling off his socks.

Bethancourt lit a cigarette and sank into the only chair in their room. "No," he agreed. "Of course, it's perfectly possible that the Fletchers tossed a poison mushroom into the basket on the porch, but so could anyone else; and we'll never prove it."

"Well," said Gibbons, "it was always unlikely that they had dined with Miss Pottlesdon. There were only two sets of dishes in the dishrack, not three." He yawned widely and

pulled his jumper over his head.

"Yes," said Bethancourt, "but they could have dropped in on their way home, ostensibly to patch things up, and slipped a mushroom into those she was using for dinner."

"Not," said Gibbons, "if they walked home with Ben Banks."

"Exactly." Bethancourt sighed.

Gibbons stifled another yawn as he removed his shirt and reached for his pajama top. "Tomorrow we can have a word with the girl, Sally, but if that doesn't turn up anything new, I'm afraid I'm bound to agree with Daniels: it was an accident."

"Just so," agreed Bethancourt, and sighed again.

Gibbons glanced at him. "Aren't you going to bed?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Bethancourt, rousing himself and laying aside his cigarette. He kicked off his shoes and went to stand before the wardrobe. He opened the doors and began to strip, folding each piece of clothing and putting it away as he went. Gibbons, now attired in a pair of dark green pajamas, joined his friend at the wardrobe with his own clothing slung over his arm.

"One thing," Bethancourt said to him, struggling out of

his pants while standing on one foot.

"Yes?"

"If that little girl made the first mistake she's ever made about mushrooms, and Miss Pottlesdon somehow failed to spot it, I for one firmly refuse to tell anyone about it."

"It's not likely anyhow," replied Gibbons. "It would be an awful big coincidence to have two people—who don't usually make mistakes about such things—both make the same mistake on the same afternoon."

"That's true," said Bethancourt, cheering. He tossed his socks into the bottom of the wardrobe and padded over to the bed. "That's perfectly true," he repeated, climbing between the sheets and thumping the pillow energetically. "I'm glad of it," he said. "I hadn't thought of it just like that." He put his glasses on the night table.

Gibbons grinned at him as he shut the wardrobe door. "I might have known you'd be worried about it," he said. "Shall I shut the lights?"

"Yes. Goodnight, Jack."

"Goodnight, Phillip."

Sally Barnes was a pert blonde of seventeen with a well-rounded figure. They found her, unexpectedly on a Sunday, at

the shop where she worked, taking inventory.

"We tried to do it all yesterday," she told them, "but there just wasn't time, and I couldn't stay late last night." She threw them a saucy glance. "I had a date."

"It would be surprising if you hadn't," replied Bethancourt gallantly. "I wonder—is it possible you might be free for lunch?"

This was evidently unexpected. "To go with you?" she asked.

"That's right. We'd very much like to buy you lunch if you can make it."

She smiled at him and he smiled back, eyes behind his glasses twinkling. "All right," she said. "Only I can't leave now. We should be done in an hour or so—how would that be?"

"Delightful," replied Bethancourt. "We'll come for you then."

They took their leave, but Sally peered after them from the window. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the grey Jaguar and a smile touched her lips.

"Who were those men, Sally?"

Miss Hanson, the owner of the shop, had come in from the back.

"The detectives Mrs. Pad-

more called in. On account of Miss Pottlesdon's death. One of them," she added, "is from Scotland Yard."

"Oh." Miss Hanson, her fears allayed, joined Sally at the window. "Which one is that?"

"The shorter one. I fancy the blond, though, don't you?"

"Nonsense, Sally. They're both much too old for you. What did they want to talk to you about, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Sally airily, "but they're taking me to lunch. I do hope I get a ride in that car."

"Very likely they'll drive you home," said Miss Hanson a trifle sharply, for she would have liked that treat, too, for all she was almost forty. "We'd best get back to work if you have a lunch date. I don't fancy having to finish alone."

"Shall we take a drive?" asked Gibbons as they left the shop. "I wouldn't mind seeing some more of the country, and we've got an hour to kill."

"If you like," replied Bethancourt. "First, however, we have to find a copy of *Vogue*."

"*Vogue*? Whatever for?"

"There are some smashing pictures of Marla in this month's issue."

Gibbons raised his eyebrow. "You miss her that much already?"

"Don't be silly, Jack." Bethancourt grinned at him. "I know how to impress a seventeen-year-old girl."

An hour later, Gibbons admitted to himself that this was true. Sally had immediately noticed the magazine and Bethancourt had graciously offered it to her, explaining that he had only purchased it to see the pictures of his girlfriend. Sally's round blue eyes had grown even rounder and she had asked, as if scarcely daring to hope, whether or not Bethancourt's girlfriend was actually a model.

"Oh, yes," Bethancourt had replied, in a very offhand manner. He had taken the magazine and flipped through it. "There she is—the redhead there. There are some other pictures of her further on."

Sally had let out something approaching a squeal. "Marla Tate?" she had asked, awestruck. "Marla Tate's your girlfriend?"

"Oh, you've heard of her then? Yes, we've been going out for about a year."

After this, Sally was more than willing to do anything she could for them, and was doubly flattered by any interest Bethancourt showed in her. Bethancourt, for his part, made a good show of being quite taken with

the young lady. Any inclination she might have had toward shielding Wes Barton was flung to the winds.

"Wes?" she said carelessly, aiming at nonchalance and rather overdoing it. "Oh, he was fun—a bit of excitement, you know. In a small place like this, you've got to take what comes along."

They were in the restaurant where Bethancourt and Gibbons had dined the previous evening, and had reached the coffee stage. Bethancourt had selected this setting as opposed to a pub or tea shop to further impress the girl, and also for privacy's sake. In a pub or tea shop your conversation can almost always be overheard.

"Of course," said Bethancourt seriously. "Did he ever mention Miss Pottlesdon to you?"

"He called her an old cat," replied Sally. "And she was. Always poking her nose in where it didn't belong. He said she'd ruined his life for him and the last thing he wanted was more trouble from her."

"More trouble?" asked Gibbons. "He anticipated some problem, then?"

Sally smiled smugly. "He was talking about me," she said. "We went for a picnic in the meadow near her house, and I said we'd best keep out

of sight or she'd be telling my parents. My parents," she added scornfully, "didn't approve of Wes."

"I see," said Bethancourt. "We wanted to talk to you about that picnic, Sally. What time did you start back?"

"Well," she said slowly, trying to remember, "it was beginning to get dark, so that would be about six."

"Was anyone else about?"

"The Fletchers," she answered. "We just caught sight of them as we were packing up the picnic things. Their backs were to us, so we finished in a hurry and went off before they could see us."

"You followed the road up towards the church?"

"Oh, no." She shook her head. "That leads right past Miss Carberry's. She'd be sure to tell Miss Pottlesdon if she saw us. No, we crossed the road and took the path through the woods behind the church. That puts you farther along, past the village. Wes had left the car there."

"No one was near Miss Pottlesdon's when you went by?"

"No. We would have seen if there had been because we were watching to make sure she didn't see us."

"Of course," said Bethancourt. "Wes went with you all the way?"

She looked surprised. "Yes," she answered. "We went for a drink afterwards—not the village pub, of course. We took the car over to the Dog and Gun."

"I suppose," put in Gibbons, "he was also with you all afternoon? He didn't go off to relieve himself or anything like that?"

The reason for this line of questioning was finally dawning on Sally.

"But the police questioned Wes," she protested. "And they said it was an accident at the inquest."

"We think it was, too," said Gibbons. "But Mrs. Padmore asked us to look into it, so we must go into every possibility. And Wes didn't tell Inspector Daniels that he'd spent the afternoon with you in the meadow by Miss Pottlesdon's house."

"He was probably protecting my reputation," said Sally, obviously tickled at the thought.

"More likely protecting his own," said Bethancourt bluntly. "After all, he's a married man." Sally looked as though she'd been slapped, and he added more kindly, "Having these little romantic interludes is all well and good, but it really is best to keep some kind of grasp on reality."

Sally, having no idea what he was talking about, merely nodded.

"So he was with you?" prompted Gibbons.

"Oh yes," she answered. "We went for a walk in the woods after we'd eaten. He did go behind a tree then to—to relieve himself, but I was there, on the other side, and he came right back. He wasn't out of my sight otherwise."

"Well, it's good to have that clear," said Gibbons.

"Yes," said Bethancourt. "You've been a big help, Sally. Thank you."

"Well, that's that," said Gibbons. They had dropped Sally off, clutching her *Vogue*, and absolutely ecstatic over the stories she would tell her friends of her afternoon. Now Gibbons looked over at Bethancourt, who was driving, rather slowly for him, down the road towards their B and B. "Phillip," he said, "you're not going to make me go and interview Susan's mother, are you? I mean, Daniels already spoke with her. If she'd noticed anyone about, she would have told him."

"Unless," answered Bethancourt, "she herself went over and poisoned Miss Pottlesdon."

"Of course," said Gibbons impatiently. "But if she did, she's hardly going to tell you. I freely admit that she might have done, or that niece of Miss Carberry's might have, but

there's not a shred of evidence that they, or anyone else, did. We might as well enjoy the afternoon."

Bethancourt smiled. "What did you have in mind?"

"They've got a cricket match on," said Gibbons. "There's a pitch along the road to Littlesdarn. It seemed to me," he added, "a very appropriate way to spend Sunday afternoon in the country."

"So it is," rejoined Bethancourt. "Very well, Jack, I give in."

He glanced at his watch. "We ought to go straight over—the match'll be half done as it is. Which way do I go?"

"Back in the other direction," said Gibbons eagerly, and then he gasped as Bethancourt abruptly stamped on the brakes and swung the wheel over so that the car slewed round in the road. Once the nose was pointing in the appropriate direction, he proceeded to demonstrate that Jaguar's claim that their cars can go from zero to sixty in eight seconds was not an idle boast.

The cricket match was in full swing. Most of the village worthies were present, as well as many others. Mrs. Padmore, dressed as if she were attending a match at Lord's, spotted them as they came across

from the car park and came to meet them.

"We're doing much better than usual," she announced delightedly. "We hardly ever win, but the other team's best bowler is out with a bad sprain. Anyway, we're a hundred and twelve for five. Of course," she added, suddenly concerned, "there are still almost fifteen overs to go. Well, I'm glad you could come for part of it."

"So are we," replied Bethancourt, and Gibbons added an affirmative, although his eyes were already glued to the pitch. "However, I'm afraid we haven't very good news for you."

"Oh." Her face fell. "The investigation, you mean? Oh dear, I did so hope you could find something."

"We've found several things," said Bethancourt, "but nothing in any way conclusive. The situation is this—"

"Oh, lovely!" cried Gibbons. "What a marvelous stroke. They should get a few runs for that."

Mrs. Padmore whirled around. "Oh, splendid," she said, watching intently. "That's us, you know." Out on the cricket pitch, two men were running back and forth, while Mrs. Padmore counted under her breath and the crowd applauded. "Three!" she ex-

claimed, clapping her hands. "But, oh dear, that leaves Harry facing the bowling. Come, we should sit down. Mr. Bethancourt, perhaps we should discuss the investigation after the match. I'm afraid, with our side doing so well . . ."

"Of course, of course," he said genially. "I'd rather watch the match myself."

They ambled over and Mrs. Padmore ushered them into the seats she had saved. She also supplied them with lemonade served in paper cups, all the while anxiously watching the players and instructing her guests as to the various merits and faults of the men presently in the field.

Bethancourt accepted his lemonade, lit a cigarette, and settled back to enjoy himself. He was very fond of cricket, although he had never excelled as a player, and it had been some time since he had seen a match played. Nevertheless, he found his attention wandering. He kept his eyes on the play, but time after time he found himself applauding when he somehow had missed what had happened. He replied automatically to all Mrs. Padmore's information and promptings, with virtually none of what she said filtering through to his brain. He was quite surprised all at once to find that the local

side was all out for a hundred and fifty-five and his hostess was urging him toward the pavilion. When the tea break was nearly over and he found he had heard less than half the conversation that had been addressed to him, he gave it up and excused himself. He had seen a small figure in jeans and a sweatshirt sitting in the grass off to one side, and he could not resist closing the last door.

"Oh, it's you," said Susan in response to his greeting. She glanced around. "Where's Cerberus?"

"I left him with Jack, over there." Bethancourt sank to the ground beside her and leant back on his elbows. "Do you mind if I ask you one or two more questions?"

"About Miss Pottlesdon?"

"Yes. About the day she was taken ill."

Susan shrugged and looked back at the pitch, where the players were redistributing themselves. Bethancourt decided to take this as an assent.

"You were talking with the Fletchers when your mother called you in?"

"They had gone on. I was up in the big maple." She turned and looked at him. "I meant to ask you before: what did Mr. Fletcher do that was so wrong?"

Bethancourt gazed back at her, perplexed. This was just the reason he found conversation with children to be so awkward: they were always asking one perfectly simple questions that one didn't know how to answer. "That's probably something your mother should explain to you," he said.

"Well, she wouldn't. Neither would Miss Carberry." She sighed. "And I suppose you won't, either."

"He was unfaithful to his wife," said Bethancourt all at once, before he knew he was going to.

She squinted at him. "I know that," she said scornfully. "What does it mean?"

"It means he'd been going about with another woman."

"Oh," she said thoughtfully. "Like my father," she added after another moment.

"Possibly," said Bethancourt cautiously; he had forgotten her mother was divorced. "Tell me, Susan, does your mother go out very much?"

"Not very much."

"Did she go out that night?"

"You mean, after I came in for supper? No, not that night. We watched the telly—we do most nights."

Bethancourt sighed. That settled it then. He was about to thank her and take his leave when a thought occurred to

him. "You said you were up in a tree," he said. "Could you see the road from there?"

She nodded. "It's at the edge of the meadow."

"So you could see the Fletchers walking home?"

"Well, I wasn't watching them, if that's what you mean." Her tone implied that she had better things to do.

Bethancourt persisted. "But you did see them?"

"I caught sight of them as they went round the bend," she admitted. "They had Mr. Banks with them. That's probably why they didn't stop at our house." She chuckled. "Miss Carberry must have been avoiding them on account of Mr. Fletcher's being bad."

"What?"

Bethancourt's tone was so sharp that she looked at him uncertainly. "Miss Carberry," she repeated. "She popped out from behind a tree as soon as the Fletchers were out of sight and scurried over to Miss Pottlesdon's. She's funny about me, is Miss Carberry . . ." Her voice trailed off as it became clear that Bethancourt was no longer listening. She regarded him for a moment or two and then turned back to the match.

"Miss Carberry went into the cottage?"

"I expect so. They always have dinner together after the

first mushroom gathering."

Her tone was abstracted. Bethancourt looked down at her and found that her attention had been captured by the match.

"Thank you," he said gravely. He rose then and left her, turning his back on the game and scanning the crowd. She did not appear to notice.

There was no answer at Miss Carberry's cottage, but Bethancourt, persevering, followed a little flagstone path to the back. He had found Pam Sullivan at the match, and she had informed him that her aunt had stayed at home, not having much taste for cricket. He had hesitated, considering whether or not he should collect Gibbons, but in the end had come away alone. Gibbons had looked so happy, sitting in the sunshine and rooting enthusiastically for the village team, that Bethancourt hadn't the heart to disturb him. Besides, he was unsure what exactly he meant to do. On the short drive to Miss Carberry's, he nearly turned back twice, but each time curiosity and a dreadful, unsettled feeling made him go on.

She was in her garden, kneeling in the upturned earth to plant lettuces. She looked up

at the sound of his footsteps, and Marzipan ran barking to greet him.

"Hello," she said. "Is the cricket over, then?"

"Not yet," replied Bethancourt. "They're in the last innings, but I wanted to have a word with you alone."

"Oh." She looked a little startled and then, recovering herself, offered him some tea, which he declined.

There was a little stone seat near where she was working. Bethancourt sat down on it and lit a cigarette while she continued to sit back on her heels, her spade forgotten in her lap, looking up at him like a dog awaiting a command. But Bethancourt smoked in silence, looking over the little garden, and at last she said, "Was there something in particular you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Yes." Bethancourt exhaled and returned his attention to her. "Yes, there was. About the night Miss Pottlesdon was poisoned. Why did you avoid the Fletchers on your way to her house for dinner?"

"But I didn't—" she began, and then stopped.

"Someone saw you," he said gently.

A little smile played about the corners of her mouth. "Susan, of course."

She was silent, looking down

at her hands encased in heavy gardening gloves.

"Why did you avoid them?" asked Bethancourt again.

"Because I didn't want to be seen, of course."

Bethancourt sighed. "I had been hoping," he said, "that it was an accident. That you, not she, had washed the mushrooms, and not checked them. It was silly of me."

"Yes," she said. "It was."

She laid the spade aside carefully and removed her gloves and placed them beside it. Rising, she dusted the dirt from her knees and then came to sit beside him on the bench.

"We'd always thought Nan would go before me," she said. "When I found Pam, I was so pleased that I could do something for her. Not immediately, of course, but when Nan died, her little income would come to me, and I could give it to Pam. I was pleased to think it wouldn't just be going to one of those stupid little charities after we both had gone, and so was Nan. And there would be someone to go through our little things, not just a sale. Nan liked that, too."

"But she didn't change her will when you found out you were ill?"

Miss Carberry shook her head. "No. I mentioned it once, but Nan just said she'd wait

and see how things went after I was dead. I suppose she was afraid that Pam would desert her after I was gone. I didn't like that." She looked at Bethancourt, and her eyes were angry. "It wasn't right. It was as if she proposed to pay for Pam's affection or penalize her if there wasn't enough of it. Well, that's not the way it works, and Nan should have known that. Either you want to do something for someone or you don't. You trust them or you don't, and if you don't, then you've got no right to expect anything back. And what about me? I've been her closest friend for years and I was dying, and she wouldn't do it just for my sake."

"So you decided to make certain things fell out as originally intended."

"No, not really." She sighed. "I didn't really plan it at all. We were gathering mushrooms and I was thinking of Pam because I'd had a phone call from her that morning. Nan and I were talking about our old schooldays, and suddenly it came over me how it had always been like this, Nan always having the upper hand, my always going along with her even when I wasn't sure, because she did have the better mind, and, well . . . she had a strong personality. I admired

that. But all at once I was angry. I had picked up a bad mushroom by mistake. I had it in my hand, I was about to throw it away, but instead I put it in Nan's basket while she wasn't looking." She paused. "It was only a gesture, of course. Nan would have found it when she was washing up." She smiled at him indulgently. "It was very silly of you, or anyone, to think that either Nan or I would have made that kind of mistake."

"You knew we would," pointed out Bethancourt.

"I suppose I did count on it. Well, I went home and was all in a stew, thinking about what Nan would think when she found it. I almost didn't go to dinner. And then I thought, what if it wasn't found? Truly, I was in two minds about it when I went over that night. It was when I saw the Fletchers and hid from them that I knew what I meant to do. And I still almost gave it up when I got there. Then Nan asked me to wash the mushrooms while she got the rest of the supper ready. So I did, and sliced them up for the salad."

"Only, by the time the salad was served, you were consumed with indigestion."

"That's right. I thought of eating it, but then we wouldn't be sure who would die first. So

I didn't." She sighed. "And now, of course, I miss her dreadfully. We'd been together for so long, you see, and I did love her. Well, at least I won't be sorry to go when my time's up."

Bethancourt lit another cigarette. They sat in silence, each occupied with their own thoughts, gazing at the new spring growths in the garden without really seeing them.

"I told Susan about Mr. Fletcher," said Bethancourt abruptly, breaking the silence and surprising Miss Carberry with the non sequitur.

She looked disapproving. "Surely that should have been her mother's choice?" she said.

"I expect so. But she asked and I answered." He grinned sheepishly. "I hated not knowing things when I was a kid."

"Nevertheless, it was probably good for you." She hesitated. "You didn't actually explain, well, the, uh, facts of life to her?"

"Certainly not."

"Thank heaven for that." She paused, and then said, "Well, I've told you a story, Mr. Bethancourt. What happens now?"

Bethancourt exhaled and carefully extinguished his cigarette. "I've just been thinking about that," he said. "I don't think anything happens. Unless you care to tell your story in court—and no barrister with

half a mind would let you—there's no proof. You might have avoided the Fletchers for any number of reasons. And you might have lied about going to dinner because you felt so horribly guilty about missing the bad mushroom when you were washing them up. All the same, I'd very likely have a go at it except for one thing."

"What is that?" she asked.

"The fact that you'll be dead in six months' time," he said brusquely. "That and, well, I'd rather like to see Pam get her hundred quid." He rose and looked down at her. "You've done a dreadful thing," he said. "I certainly don't condone it. But I somehow don't feel that it's my part to punish you for it."

"Perhaps that's because I shall soon be facing punishment by a higher authority."

"Possibly," said Bethancourt, "although, to be frank, that's not one of my stronger beliefs. They used to hang murderers, Miss Carberry, and you shall shortly be facing that sentence without any help from me. Why should I muck about with it?"

She looked at him gravely. "That is a very amoral judgment," she said, and then she sighed. "All the same, I thank you for it. It's odd, though, for someone like myself to benefit from such amorality. I have al-

ways led such a moral life."

"I think you can hardly make that claim any longer," replied Bethancourt.

Gibbons picked up his spare pair of shoes, shook his head over the amount of mud clinging to them, and sat down to brush it off. He glanced at Bethancourt, who was balling up his dirty socks and mashing them into the corners of his leather carryall.

"Where did you get to this afternoon?" he asked. "You didn't seem to want to discuss it in front of Mrs. Padmore at dinner."

"No, I didn't."

Despite the fact that they had had to concur in Daniels' conclusion that Miss Pottlesdon's death had been an accident, Mrs. Padmore had insisted on standing them dinner. They had explained to her that there were certainly ways in which Miss Pottlesdon might have been murdered by any number of people, but in the absence of any kind of proof, it was impossible to do otherwise than accept the accident verdict. She had been disappointed, certainly, but had taken it rather well. Most of her disappointment had been swallowed up in her pleasure at the outcome of the cricket

match, which the village team had won. All in all, it had been a pleasant evening.

"So where were you?" asked Gibbons.

Bethancourt picked up a grey sock from the bottom of the wardrobe and looked about for its mate. "I went to see Miss Carberry," he said. "I had a hunch."

"You didn't mention it at dinner."

"No, because it turned out to be right." He paused in his search and met Gibbons' eyes squarely. "I thought about not telling you," he said candidly. "But that didn't seem right somehow."

"I should say not!" said Gibbons indignantly.

"Well, you're not going to like what I've done," continued Bethancourt, resuming his search for the missing sock. "So I may as well warn you in advance that there's nothing you can do about it."

Gibbons was beginning to feel uneasy. He scraped in a desultory way at a patch of mud. "What have you done, Phillip?" he asked quietly.

"Miss Carberry deliberately poisoned her friend," said Bethancourt. "And I don't intend to tell anyone but you about it."

"Miss Carberry?" repeated Gibbons, looking up in amazement. "Of course," he added in

a moment, "it would be child's play for her to bring it off, I see that. But why, Phillip? Why would she do such a thing?"

"I'm going to tell you," replied Bethancourt. "Where the hell are my cigarettes?"

"On the table there."

Bethancourt, abandoning his lone sock, seized the packet and settled himself on the bed opposite his friend. He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and began to explain what Miss Carberry had done and why. Gibbons listened attentively, his shoes forgotten, without interrupting.

When Bethancourt had finished, his friend sat silently for a few moments. Bethancourt rose and began folding a sweater.

"It's not a very good case," said Gibbons at last.

"No," agreed Bethancourt. "It would be the devil to make it stick."

"I see your point," added Gibbons. "She's dying in any case. You'd never get a conviction against a sweet old lady who had six months to live."

"No—I thought of that."

Gibbons sighed and went back to his shoes. "I don't know as I disapprove of your decision," he said. "I can't say I have much stomach myself for dragging her into court and ruining her reputation as well as

what's left of her life. I liked Miss Carberry."

"So did I."

"All the same, Phillip, if this had been an official investigation, I'd be honor bound to take notice of it."

"I know." Bethancourt, having deposited the rest of his clothing into the carryall, was once again looking for his sock, and his reply was muffled since his head was presently in the bottom of the wardrobe.

All at once, Gibbons laughed. "You realize, Phillip," he said, "that we both can now be considered accomplices after the fact? Not a very good thing for an ambitious sergeant at Scotland Yard."

"I'll never tell," promised Bethancourt. "Jack, I've lost a sock."

"Maybe it got in with my things." Gibbons set aside his shoes and dug through his own luggage, producing a small cloth bag which he emptied onto the bed. "Check those."

"There it is," said Bethancourt, pouncing. "Not only an accomplice after the fact, but a thief as well. You'd best be careful never to cross me, Jack. This is an almost irresistible opportunity for blackmail."

"No proof," replied Gibbons dryly, repacking his dirty things in their bag. "Are you ready to go, then?"

"Yes," said Bethancourt, chucking the sock into his bag and zipping it up. "Come along, Cerberus. Time to leave, old boy."

Outside, the stars were bright and the crickets were chirping loudly. Bethancourt stored their bags in the boot while Gibbons gazed about him and sniffed the night air appreciatively.

"Well," he said, "I must say I enjoyed our weekend, Phillip. The country air has done wonders for me."

"You should get out of town more often," said Bethancourt, opening the car door for the dog.

"I really do hate to leave," said Gibbons, lingering outside the car. "The only thing lacking," he added, "was a pretty girl or two. At least, there was

one, but she was only interested in you."

"What?" asked Bethancourt, arrested in the act of starting the engine. "Who do you mean? Not Sally, surely?"

"Of course not," replied Gibbons, opening the passenger door. "I meant Mrs. Padmore."

"Nothing there," said Bethancourt briefly, switching on the ignition. "She's far too righteous to ever be unfaithful to her husband. Do get in, Jack."

Gibbons complied, but paused before closing the door. "It really is pretty here," he said. "Those trees over there—don't they look nice against the night sky? Especially that big one."

"That's an oak," said Bethancourt, and let in the clutch.

UNSOLVED

by Walter
Shepherd

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

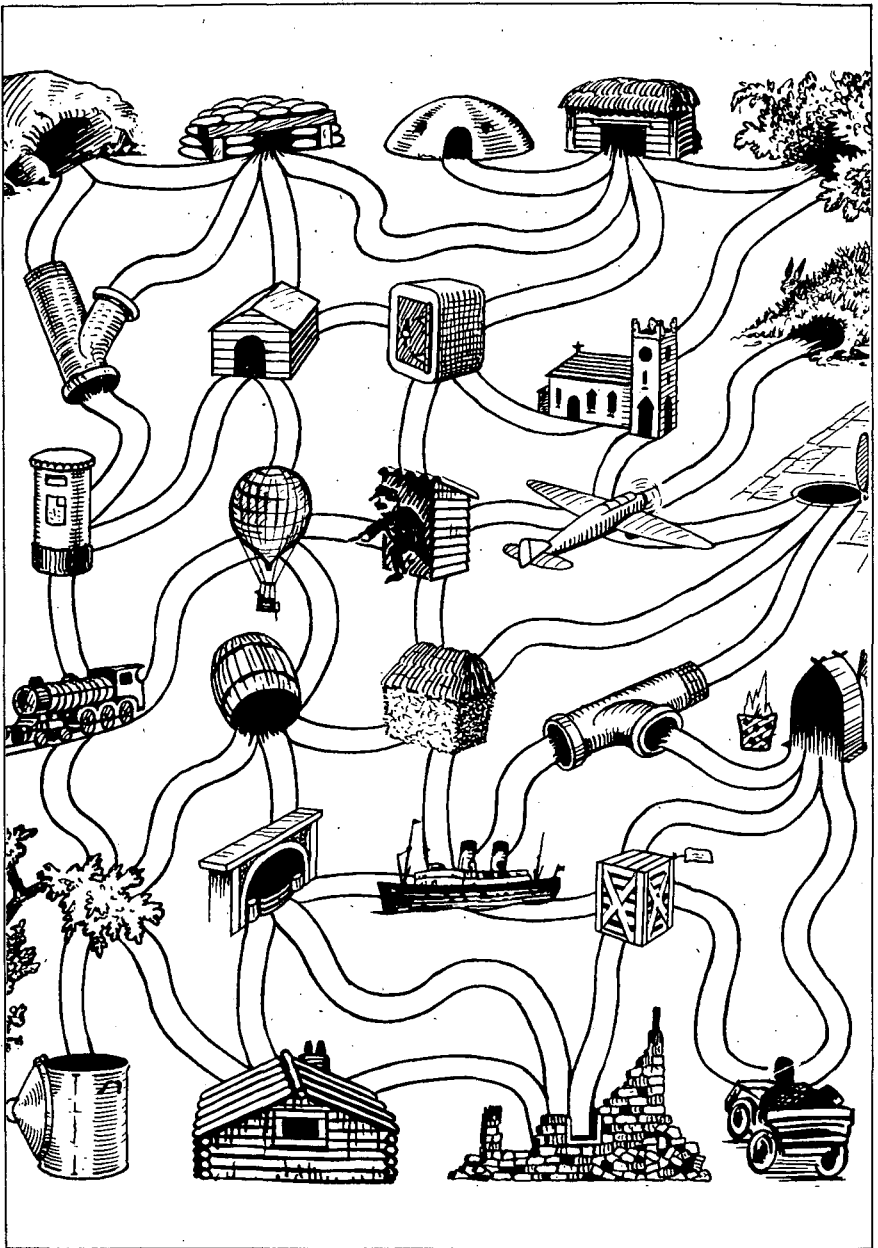
The answer will appear in the July issue.

This is a game for two. Get a friend to pose as the spy (center) and you take the jeep (bottom, right). Making the first move, you then chase the spy from hideout to hideout, moving in turns one stage at a time. Curious, but once you have visited one particular hideout, the spy's capture is absolutely certain, no matter how he dodges. What is that particular hiding place, and what is the least number of moves you need to make in order to catch him?

Note: *It is convenient to use two small counters or buttons for making the moves, and each player must take his turn, even if he merely goes back again to his last hideout.*

See page 258 for the solution to the May puzzle.

"A Spy Hunt" from BIG BOOK OF MAZES & LABYRINTHS by Walter Shepherd, © 1973 by Walter Shepherd. originally published by Dover Publications, Inc. Used by permission of Rupert Crew Ltd. (London).



A Visitor to Mombasa

by James Holding

Sergeant Harper of the Mombasa Police was daydreaming about Rebecca Conway when his telephone rang. He reached out with a long arm for the instrument on his desk.

"Yes?"

"Constable Jenkins here, sir. Waterfront Detail."

"What is it, Jenkins?"

"I've got a queer one, sir. Probably nothing in it, but I thought I ought to report it." Jenkins was new to the job and anxious to play everything safe.

"What is it?" Harper repeated.

"Man named Crosby, sir. Works near the end of the causeway, a night watchman. He claims he saw a leopard sneaking across the causeway into town last night. Or this morning, rather. Just before dawn."

"A leopard!"

Harper's voice held surprise.

"Yes, sir." Jenkins waited respectfully for Harper's reaction.

It came promptly. "Fellow was drunk," Harper said.

"I thought of that, sir." Jenkins sounded worried now, but continued. "Crosby admits to a couple of pints on the job during the night. But he swears he saw a leopard. Walking across the causeway from the mainland, bold as brass. He couldn't see the cat's spots, it was too dark, but he says he could see the shape all right for just a moment, and he's sure it was a leopard."

Harper said, "We've had no sighting reports this morning from anyone. Which we surely would have by now, if a leopard's on the loose. Anyway, thanks, Jenkins. I'll look into it." He hung up.

Harper leaned back in his desk chair. He damned the sticky heat of his cramped office and the gullibility of all police recruits. A leopard in Mombasa—he snorted. Tsavo, Nairobi, and Amboseli parks weren't far away, of course, but no, the hell with it. He went back to picturing the bright Scandinavian beauty of Lieutenant Conway's wife.

Ten minutes later, his telephone rang again. The constable on

switchboard duty said, "A lady calling about a leopard, sir. Insists on speaking to someone in authority."

Harper groaned. "Put her on."

The lady, a Mrs. Massingale, reported seeing a creature she was sure was a leopard at daybreak that morning.

"Where?" Harper asked.

"Right here in Mombasa, sergeant," Mrs. Massingale said indignantly. "The least we could expect in this godforsaken city, it seems to me, is protection against wild animals wandering freely about the streets."

"I meant," explained Harper with exaggerated patience, "just where in Mombasa did you see this leopard?"

"On the old railway line near Mbaraki Creek. Our cottage isn't fifty feet from the line. I happened to look out a rear window this morning at daybreak and there was this black shadow slinking along the ties. I caught its silhouette quite clearly for a moment. It was a leopard."

"Thanks for reporting it, Mrs. Massingale," Harper said. "I'll look into the matter promptly."

"See that you do." She hung up with a muted crash that made Harper grin.

Two reports. So perhaps there *was* a leopard in Mombasa, unlikely as it seemed. Harper stood up, a tall, solidly-built man with a heavy black mustache and an air of general frustration he made no attempt to conceal.

The frustration was easily explained, even understandable, in a man of his type. He had come late to police work after a long career as a white hunter in Tanganyika before *uhuru*. Now, after being mildly famous in East Africa, he found himself all at once a lowly sergeant of police, reduced to obeying the orders of Lieutenant Conway, a stuffy man, ten years his junior, who was married, damn his eyes, to the most beautiful woman in Mombasa.

Harper stepped two paces from his desk to the city map taped on his office wall. A leopard reported on the causeway just before dawn—he put a fingertip on the map at the end of the causeway. A leopard reported on the railway line near Mbaraki Creek at daybreak—he touched the spot with another fingertip, and regarded the space between his fingertips narrowly. Yes, he decided, it's quite possible. Suddenly he felt a surge of cheerfulness. Dealing with a leopard was work he knew. Still looking at the wall map, he tried consciously to put himself inside the spotted skin and the

narrow skull of a leopard, to think as the cat might think, to forecast the movements of the killer he had come to know so well on a hundred safaris.

Suppose, he mused, the leopard was an accidental fugitive from one of the nearby game reserves. The unexpected sight of a long bridge, deserted and comfortably dark, might well have aroused enough feline curiosity in the leopard to make it venture out upon the causeway. Once there, a drift of scent across the water from dockside cattle pens, perhaps, might have drawn it on in quest of meat. Harper could picture vividly the silent cat, padding cautiously across the causeway, nostrils twitching with finicky distaste at the odors of diesel fuel and rotting refuse that vied with the cattle smell over Kilindini Harbor.

Having crossed the bridge, finding no direct route to the cattle scent that drew him, and suddenly surrounded by the strange effluvia of a large city, the leopard would rapidly become confused and frightened, Harper theorized. The beast's curiosity and hunger would be forgotten in an instinctive urge to find cover quickly in this unfamiliar terrain.

The cat, Harper felt, would therefore turn aside from the wide vulnerable expanse of Makupa Road into the comparative seclusion of the deserted railway line, stepping delicately along the ties through the industrial section of town to Mbaraki Creek, where Mrs. Massingale had caught a fleeting glimpse of him. Thence, it seemed obvious from the map, the leopard might be expected to come out on the bluffs overlooking the sea at Azania Drive, footsore now, apprehension growing as the daylight strengthened, the need for cover reaching panic proportions.

Azania Drive; Harper tried to recall the configuration of the land just there where the railway line bisected the drive. It was a bleak and lonely stretch of the seaside road, as he remembered it, meandering along the bluffs past an ancient Arab watchtower and bearing little resemblance to the fashionable Azania Drive that also yielded a view of the sea to the Oceanic Hotel, the golf club, and scores of comfortable residences beyond. At that place on Azania Drive, above the ferry, a grove of baobab trees stood, defying the sea winds, Harper remembered.

He nodded to himself, utterly intent, thinking with a sense almost of excitement that the thick twisted foliage of those baobab trees just possibly might offer welcome sanctuary to a frightened leopard.

He turned his back to the map. His next step was clear. He should delegate Constable Gordon in the squad room to go at once and check out the baobab trees on Azania Drive for a stray leopard. Gordon would welcome the action, and he was an excellent shot, too, Harper knew. Yet, after the stimulating exercise of mentally plotting the leopard's probable whereabouts in Mombasa, Harper was reluctant to turn the hunt over to somebody else before he himself had even sighted the game. He needn't be in at the kill, he told himself. On safari, he had always turned the final shot over to his clients—he was used to that—but he *did* want to mark down the target with certainty before yielding the kill to another. Aside from his thus far unsuccessful campaign to make Rebecca Conway unfaithful to her pompous husband, this city leopard hunt was the most exciting thing that had happened to Harper since he joined the police force.

Yielding to temptation, he reached for his hat, took field glasses from the shelf under his wall map, and strode into the squad room. "Back in a few minutes, Gordon," he told the constable in passing. "Take over until Lieutenant Conway gets in, will you?" Conway never showed for duty until nine o'clock. Yet who could blame him, Harper thought enviously, with the voluptuous Rebecca to keep him at home until the last moment?

He felt the sweat start the moment he stepped out of headquarters into the compound. He climbed into one of the two police cars parked there, a Land Rover. As he turned out of the police compound and headed for Azania Drive, the sun had already warmed the driver's seat so that the cushions burned him, even through his trousers.

A hundred and fifty yards short of the baobab trees on Azania Drive, he stopped the Land Rover, parked it beside the road, and walked slowly toward the trees. The field glasses hung on their strap about his neck. It was still only a little after eight. Traffic was very light on Azania Drive.

He waited until the road was empty both ways before he stepped from it onto the springy turf that ran like a shaggy carpet along the landward side of the road, solidly covering the acre of ground under the baobab grove. He walked carefully to within thirty yards of the trees, then stopped and brought the glasses up to his eyes and examined carefully the twisted branches and tangled foliage of the baobabs. He saw nothing that looked even remotely like a leopard.

After five minutes, he moved across the road, still well clear of the trees, and walked another fifty yards to a position from which he could comb the grove from a different angle. He swept the glasses slowly from tree to tree, conscious of growing disappointment as they failed to find what he sought.

The glasses were trained on the last of the trees—a gnarled giant closer to the road than its neighbors—when suddenly, with the sense of electrical shock that accompanies an unexpected explosion, he found himself gazing through the magnifying lenses at two merciless yellow eyes which seemed disembodied in the tree's sun-dappled shade.

He breathed an exclamation that was part admiration for the magnificent cat, whose savage stare transfixed him, part satisfaction at his own astuteness in locating the beast.

Carefully he marked the tree and the cat's position in it. Then he withdrew to his Land Rover and drove away, whistling softly to himself and thinking he should have brought a rifle with him when he left headquarters. Still, he hadn't really expected there was a chance in ten that he'd find the leopard in the grove of baobab trees, he justified himself.

All the same, the cat was there!

Harper felt like celebrating, all at once, his frustrations temporarily forgotten. He had brought off a surprising feat, really: tracking a wild leopard . . . mentally . . . through several miles of sprawling city to a specific lair. His mood was one of exhilaration.

This is what I am good at, he reflected, this is what I was meant to do—not piddling along at a stinking little police job in a dirty city, but working with wild animals, somehow, somewhere, in free, open country, tracking them down and killing them, or working to preserve them from extinction, no matter which, so long as the job was useful and, yes, dangerous. He'd made a horrible mistake when he gave up hunting animals for hunting men. If he could only convince Rebecca Conway to go with him, he'd leave Mombasa tomorrow for Nairobi, Uganda, Australia, India, Alaska—anywhere away from the imperious beck and call of Rebecca's impossible, intolerable husband.

He'd asked her a dozen times to leave the fool she was married to and join him in a new free life somewhere else; but Rebecca only smiled at his pleading, kissed him lightly on the cheek like a sister, called him an aging Lothario (at forty-one!), and quoted Shakespeare at him about preferring to bear those ills she had

than fly to others that she knew not of. She was flattered by his passion for her, of course, yet she was too fond of her idle, easy life in Mombasa as Conway's wife to risk it lightly.

Harper decided to drive back to headquarters by way of the center of town. That would give him a little extra time to savor his success with the leopard; to anticipate the soon-to-come thrill of squeezing off the perfectly-aimed shot that would rid Mombasa of its dangerous visitor in the baobab tree. Fifteen minutes' delay in finishing off the leopard would make no difference to anyone, so far as he could see. The leopard was treed well off the road. It was still frightened, edgy, and hungrier than ever, no doubt, yet posed no threat, Harper knew, to passersby on Azania Drive unless someone approached its tree.

His memory played back to him one of the warnings he had always issued to hunters on safari: remember that a treed leopard, if hungry, frightened, or wounded, will usually attack anything that moves beneath it. So why would anyone approach that baobab tree? Harper was the only person in the city who could possibly have any interest in it.

The high crenellated battlements of Fort Jesus loomed on his left above the crimson blossoms of a flame tree as he passed the Mombasa Club. In the center of the turnabout, the bust of King George caught the morning sunlight and seemed to wink at Harper as he toiled the Land Rover around the circle and into Prince Arthur Street.

At police headquarters, he remembered to park his car in the compound off the street, even though he intended to use the Land Rover again at once, as soon as he secured a rifle from the gun case in his office. That was one of Lieutenant Conway's silly rules, if you like: that the curb before headquarters must be kept clear and free at all times, so that if the wooden building ever caught fire, there would be ample space for the fire-fighting apparatus to park there.

Thinking of Lieutenant Conway and, inevitably, of Rebecca, Harper's leopard-inspired high spirits drained rapidly away. The exhilaration of ten minutes ago had turned to creeping depression by the time he reached his office; the elation of winning a guessing game with a leopard lost its edge. If Rebecca refused him one more time, he swore to himself, he'd throw up this bloody job anyway, and go off without her.

He unlocked his gun cabinet and took down one of his old rifles,

unused since his last safari five years ago! As a special favor Lieutenant Conway had allowed him to keep this personal weapon as an addition to the headquarters' arsenal. Harper was glad of it now.

He put ammunition into his pocket, relocked the gun cabinet, and was turning for the door when his telephone rang. Impatiently he paused by his desk, scooped up the receiver, and said, "Yes?"

"Some fellow wants the lieutenant," the switchboard man said.

"Then give him the lieutenant," snapped Harper. "I'm busy."

"Lieutenant's not in yet, sir." The constable was apologetic.

Harper glanced at his watch. It was not yet nine o'clock. "Who's calling the lieutenant?"

"He won't say, sir. Says it's confidential and urgent. Native, I believe, and he speaks Swahili."

"Put him on."

The caller's voice was male, low-pitched, sounded very young. "Who is this?" it asked.

Harper said, "Sergeant Harper. Lieutenant Conway is not here. What do you want?"

"The reward, sir," the young voice whispered. "The reward offered by your lieutenant."

"What reward?"

"For arrow poison, sir. For the names of Wakamba doctors who make arrow poison against the new law."

"Oh." Harper remembered that Conway had been trying for six months to discover which of the Wakamba witch doctors were still manufacturing arrow poison, and thus contributing to massive native slaughter of the game in the reserves. The arrow poison of the Wakamba was made from tree sap; it smelled like licorice; it left a black discoloration in the wound; and it was capable of killing a bull elephant in fifteen minutes.

Harper said, "Have you earned the reward?"

"Yes, sir. I have two names for Lieutenant Conway."

"Who are they? I'll tell the lieutenant."

"No names," the young Wakamba murmured, "until the reward is given. Not until then."

Harper grinned. "Don't trust us, is that it?"

The boy was silent.

"We'll give you the reward first, in that case. All right? What's your name?"

"I have no name," said the young voice very formally. "I am

risking death to give the lieutenant this information, sir. My own people will kill me if they learn of it."

Harper tried it another way. "Where are you calling from?"

"The Golden Key."

Harper knew the Golden Key, a disreputable bar immediately across the Nyalla Bridge. Used to be called the Phantom Inn because natives would dress up in sheets and act the ghost to startle customers. "You a houseboy there?" he asked.

"No, sir."

Harper hefted his rifle, impatient to go after his leopard. "How can we arrange to give you the reward if you won't tell us who you are?"

"Very simple, sir. I will meet the lieutenant in private. He brings me the reward. I give him the names of the poison-makers."

Harper considered for a moment. "Where do you want the lieutenant to meet you?"

"Where no Wakamba can see me talking to a policeman." Simple and clear.

"When?" asked Harper.

"Today, sir, please. This morning, if possible. I need the reward very badly, sir. Otherwise, of course. . . ." His voice, touched with desperation now, trailed off.

"All right, then," Harper said. "I'll meet you and bring the reward, since the lieutenant isn't here just yet. How much were you promised?"

"Ten pounds, sir." Eagerness now. "That will be good. Where shall I meet you?"

The Wakamba boy's simple question seemed to echo and reecho in a strange pervasive way inside Harper's head, and the idea that was born in his mind at that instant seemed to make his heart shift position in his chest. He sank into his desk chair, clutching the rifle on the desk before him with one hand.

He took a deep breath and said, "You know the old Arab watchtower, boy? Below Azania Drive near the ferry?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll meet you there in an hour. Or Lieutenant Conway will, if he comes here soon enough. You can make it in an hour, can't you?"

"Yes. But remember, please, I dare not be seen, sir. Azania Drive is very public. Is there no more private place we can meet?"

"That's private enough." Harper was brusque. "Don't use Azania

Drive to get there, come up the shore line on the beach under the bluffs. No one will see you. No one ever goes there, to the tower."

"Very well," said the soft, boyish voice. "I'll be there, sir. One hour."

"Good," Harper said. His hand was sweating on the rifle stock. After he hung up, he dried his palms on the jacket of his uniform. He glanced again at his watch: nine ten. Conway was later than usual today.

He rose and put the rifle back in the wall cabinet. Then, pretending to be busy over a stack of reports, he sat quietly at his desk until he heard Lieutenant Conway's fussy voice in the squad room, greeting Constable Gordon as he passed through his office.

Harper waited a moment or so before walking into Conway's room. "Morning, sergeant," Conway said briskly. "Something on your mind?"

Harper told him about the telephone call from the young Wakamba informer who wouldn't give his name. "Now you're here, sir," he finished matter-of-factly, "I expect you'll want to meet the boy and get his information yourself, since it's your pigeon, so to speak."

"Of course." Conway rubbed his hands together in a gesture of satisfaction that Harper found extremely irritating. He was exultant, his high voice almost a crow of pleasure as he went on: "So the clever lad, whoever he is, has a couple of witch doctors' names for me, does he? Quite a feather in our cap, sergeant, if we can clear up this arrow poison business at last, eh? Where am I supposed to meet him?"

Harper said quietly, "At the Arab watchtower below Azania Drive. It's private enough to quiet the boy's fears of being seen, I thought, yet within easy reach for us. You know it, of course?"

"Certainly I know it. An admirable choice, sergeant. There and back in fifteen minutes without unduly wasting the taxpayers' time, eh? There's an old track down the bluff to the tower's base, as I remember it."

"Right, sir. You can park by the grove of baobab trees on Azania Drive and go straight through under the trees to the cliff edge, where the track goes down."

"I must remember to take the boy's money. What time did you tell him you'd be there?"

"As soon as I could. He seemed anxious to get it over with. He's been at considerable risk, he claims."

"I'll leave at once." Lieutenant Conway stood up. "Take charge here, sergeant." He strutted from the room, calling loudly to the cashier outside to give him ten pounds at once.

That was at nine twenty. At ten fifteen the call came.

"A motorist on Azania Drive just called in, sir," the switchboard man said. "Says he saw a fellow lying under a tree up there, covered with blood, as he was driving past. Stopped to see if he could help. Got to within fifty feet of the man under the tree and saw he was dead, so he called us."

"Dead!" Harper kept his voice level. "How could he tell from fifty feet away?"

"No face left, sir," the switchboard man said, as though he were reporting a shortage of beer in the commissary icebox. "Bundle of bloody flesh and shredded clothes, the motorist says. As though the fellow'd been mauled by a leopard, maybe." The constable cleared his throat. "Any chance, sir, it could have been the leopard the lady reported earlier?"

"Possible," Harper said. "Where'd he telephone from?"

"The nearest house. He'll stand by until one of our chaps gets there, he says."

"Fine. Hope he has enough sense to keep people out from under that tree where the dead man is. Where is it on Azania Drive?"

"Near the old Arab watchtower. There's a grove of baobab trees just there. . . ."

"Right," Harper said. "I'm on my way. Better take a rifle, I guess. Give any calls for me to Constable Gordon."

Surprisingly, when he reached the baobab grove and drew up behind Conway's parked car, there was no one in view nearby save for the motorist, a man named Stacy, who had telephoned headquarters. Greeting Harper's arrival with obvious relief, he said he'd managed to send curiosity seekers—only a handful so far—quickly about their business by telling them there was a wild leopard loose in the grove.

"Good work," grunted Harper, stepping from his car. As though drawn by magnets, his eyes went to the ghastly figure lying asprawl under the nearest tree. Then, in a voice that sounded shocked even to him, he said, "From the looks of that poor chap under the tree, I'd say you were right about the leopard, Mr. Stacy."

Stacy swallowed hard. "I was sick in the ditch when I saw it," he said. "Then I ran like hell and called you."

Harper nodded and reached into the back of the Land Rover for

the rifle. "So let's see what we can do about it," he said. "Get across the road, away from the trees, will you, Mr. Stacy, and handle anybody else who may stop to gawk?"

Stacy was more than glad to withdraw across the road.

Harper knew where his target was. For Stacy's benefit, however, he was forced to carry on a pretended search of the baobab tree. He moved to various vantage points, left and right of the tree, the rifle held ready. At length, he suddenly raised a hand to Stacy and nodded vigorously, as though he had at last located the cat.

As indeed he had. Even without the field glasses, he had no trouble zeroing in on those blazing eyes turned unblinkingly toward him, and even with the field glasses, he could see quite plainly the streaks and spatters of blood on the savage muzzle. Lieutenant Conway's blood, he told himself with grim satisfaction.

He brought up the gun, steadied his sights on the small target, and squeezed off his shot.

Instantly a squalling cyclone of spotted hide and sheathed claws fell out of the tree, crashing through the baobab foliage. At the crack of the shot, a widow bird rose from the top of a neighboring tree and flapped slowly away, trailing its long black feathers. Harper wondered if that were a sign. When the leopard struck the ground, only a few feet from its mangled victim, it was quite dead.

"You got him!" yelled Stacy from across the road, his voice thin from excitement. "Bravo!"

Harper didn't take his eyes off the leopard, holding the gun ready for a second shot, although he was quite sure the first had done its work thoroughly. He was remembering another of his maxims: never approach downed game until you are certain it is dead.

At length he was satisfied. He motioned to Stacy to stay where he was and, stepping carefully on the rough turf, made his way to the baobab tree and the still figures under it. A glance showed him the leopard was quite dead; a head shot of which he could be proud.

He turned, then, toward Lieutenant Conway's corpse, his brain suddenly busy with a variety of thoughts. He must not forget to give the Wakamba boy at the watchtower his reward and settle the arrow poison business, now that Conway was gone. He must inform Rebecca Conway of her husband's tragic end and console her as best he could. Would he be promoted now to lieutenant, and thus be able to offer Rebecca a continuation of the privileged life she seemed to find so enchanting in Mombasa? Given time, he was

sure he could persuade her to marry him—and now, he thought, smiling a little, he had lots of time.

He was wrong. He didn't even have time to raise his eyes to the tree branch above him, or to bring up the rifle, still held loosely in his hand. In the last split-second of his life, before pitiless teeth and talons tore his throat out, Harper had time for but a single flash of realization: there had been a *pair* of leopards visiting Mombasa.



ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S 36th ANNIVERSARY SALE!



Celebrate our anniversary with savings! You will receive 4 Alfred Hitchcock classic anthologies of your choice. **PLUS,** receive a fifth book **FREE!**

Please send my 4 books, plus my 5th book free that I've indicated at right. Enclosed is \$9.95 plus \$3.00 postage & handling.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

St/Zip _____

Mail to:

Alfred Hitchcock

P.O. Box 40

Vernon, NJ 07462

Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery
(outside US add \$6.00).

MFGH-9

- ___ #27 Murder and Other Mishaps
- ___ #26 Shrouds and Pockets
- ___ #25 Most Wanted
- ___ #24 The Shadow of Silence
- ___ #23 A Brief Darkness
- ___ #22 A Mystery by the Tale
- ___ #21 Words of Prey
- ___ #19 Grave Suspicions
- ___ #18 Crimewatch
- ___ #17 Mortal Errors
- ___ #16 A Choice of Evils
- ___ #15 Borrowers of the Night
- ___ #13 Deathreach
- ___ #12 Fear

Pitter-Patter

by Ed Dumonte

I was an honest man before the day I asked Barbara Ann to marry me. I don't mean by that to blame Barbara Ann for my adventure in crime, but it's a fact that until I promised to marry her I was perfectly content with my job at the filling station.

Barbara Ann is without a doubt the sweetest, prettiest little girl I ever knew, but I think the reason I proposed to her is because she was so convenient. We lived on the same floor of the rooming house and, because I worked nights at the gas station and she worked days in an office downtown, we kept meeting each other in the hall. As I left for work at night she'd be getting in from a date or a movie with some girlfriends; when I got home in the morning she'd be leaving for her office.

Soon we were greeting each other like old friends, in a little while I was dating her, and before long Barbara Ann began waiting for me to get home from the station in the morning with breakfast and a goodnight kiss.

Now, I work hard all night, and when I get home I'm tired and shouldn't be held responsible for what I might say. Anyhow, it was one of those mornings, over strong coffee and sugar covered doughnuts, that I asked Barbara Ann to marry me, and she said yes. That was the day I began losing sleep over how I was going to provide for a wife.

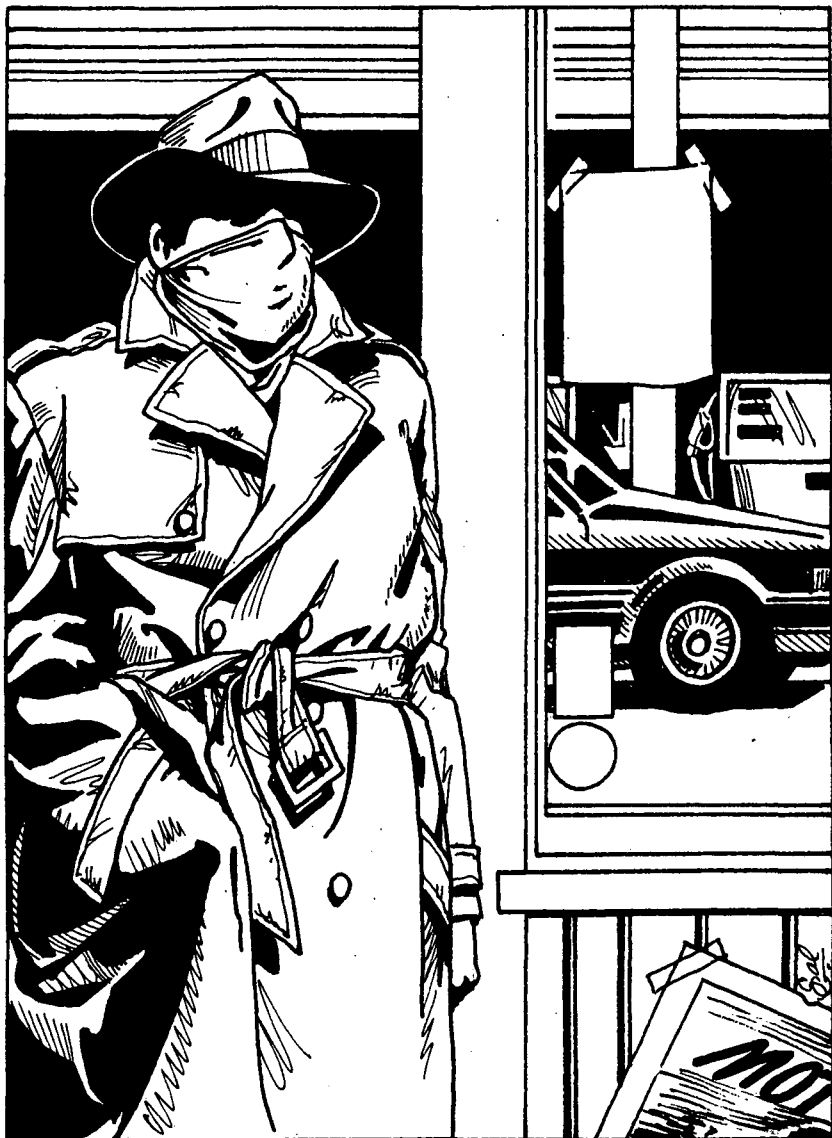
And a week later the filling station was held up again.

He came into the office of the station about two thirty in the morning, wearing a Hollywood gangster trenchcoat with the collar turned up. His hat was pulled down over his forehead, and a handkerchief covered the lower part of his face. He stood in the doorway glaring at me, one hand held ominously in the pocket of his coat.

"Okay, Mac, this is a—"

"Yeah, I know. Press the NO SALE key on the cash register to open it. The bank deposit envelope is behind the oil cans on the second shelf."

It wasn't the first time the station had been robbed. It happened every month or so, and



"IT TAKES YEARS TO PERFECT YOUR OWN STYLE. IT AIN'T SO EASY AS YOU
THINK."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

always between two and four in the morning.

"That's right, Mac," he said, heading for the cash register. "You just cooperate and nobody'll get hurt."

"That's a real good disguise you've got," I told him. "I wouldn't be able to identify you if I saw you again."

"Yeah, thanks. Simple but effective, that's my policy. Hey, what's the matter with this cash register? You trying to pull a fast one?"

"Oh, I must have locked it. Sorry. Turn the key to the right, then press the NO SALE button."

He did, and the cash drawer popped open. With his free hand he scooped the money out of the machine and stuffed it into his pocket. The other hand remained in the pocket of his coat, pointing at me threateningly.

"Say, do you really have a gun in that pocket?"

"What do you mean? Of course I have a gun. You try something funny and you'll find out."

"Oh, I wasn't going to try anything," I assured him. "I just wondered. The guy who stuck me up last month only had a toy pistol. A couple of months before that, the guy just kept his hand in his pocket, didn't have anything at all."

"Well, I got a real gun," he said and pulled it partly out of his pocket for me to see. Then, behind his mask, he gave what might have been a giggle. "I ain't got any bullets for it, but don't let that give you any ideas. Where did you say that bank envelope was?"

"Behind the oil cans on the second shelf."

He took the envelope and put it with the money from the cash register. Then he backed away from me, toward the door. "All right, I'm leaving now. Don't call the cops until—"

"Aren't you going to tell me how much money you took?"

"Why should I?"

"I gotta pay taxes, you know. I know how much was in the envelope; just count the money from the cash register. Go ahead, you've got time. Nobody will be in for a couple of hours."

Grumbling, he took the loose cash from his pocket and counted it. "Sixty-three dollars," he snapped when he finished counting. "A lousy night."

"Sixty-three? Are you sure? It should be more."

He counted the money again. "Seventy-three. I missed a ten. It's still a lousy night. All right, I'm leaving now. Don't call the cops—"

"It sure must take a lot of nerve to stick up a place."

"You bet your life it does. And brains, too."

"Brains? Go on, what brains does it take to stick a gun in a guy's face and say 'stick 'em up'?"

"Boy, you amateurs! You think that's all there is to it? Let me tell you, Mac, it takes a lot more than that. If you're going to be a pro you got to develop your own style, a *modus operandi* the cops call it. Take me, for instance. My M.O. is to pick out five or six gas stations that look ripe for plucking. I spend three weeks or a month casing the joints, then when everything is laid out I pull all the jobs in one night and blow town before morning. Neat, eh? But it takes years to perfect your own style. It ain't so easy as you think."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. It ain't so easy."

"You bet your life it ain't. All right, I'm leaving now. Don't call the—"

"That's too bad. I'll never be able to pull it off by myself."

"Pull what off?"

"A robbery. I know a place that's just crying to be robbed. But I don't have the nerve to do it, or the brains to try it right now."

"Ah, what do you know about it? You probably think a bank is a good place to rob because it has a lot of money."

"Well, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't! A bank is tough. It takes a lot of planning to rob a bank, and equipment." As he talked his voice became dreamy and far away. "You got to know the bank schedule right to the second, and time the job just right. You got to train a bunch of boys to be in the right place at the right time. You got to plan a getaway route in advance, and have a place to hide out until things cool off."

He ended the statement with a sigh. "I'll rob a bank someday, but it'll take a big investment."

"Well, this is nothing like that," I told him. "It's just thirty thousand dollars in an old lady's shoebox."

"An old lady, huh? I don't like that. Them old ladies are tricky."

"No, not this one. This old lady is my Aunt Rosemary, and she runs a roadhouse outside of town. She must rake in seven, eight thousand a week, and she only goes to the bank once a month, so the rest of the time the money just lays around in piles. But what's the use of talking about it. I don't have the guts to try, and I know it."

The man left the doorway of the station and, motioning me back away from him with his free hand, sat on a corner of the desk.

"Now wait a minute, Mac. Let's talk this over. Maybe we can work something out."

"It's no use. I told you, I don't have the nerve for it."

"No, but I do."

"You mean we could work together on this stickup?"

"Don't jump to conclusions," he snarled at me. Then, through the pocket of his coat, he pointed the gun he didn't have bullets for at me. "And don't move so fast, it makes me itchy. Now, tell me, you know what day of the month this old lady goes to the bank?"

"Sure. The first banking day of every month."

"And you know the layout of the roadhouse?"

"Like the back of my hand."

"Well, then maybe, just maybe, we can work together on this to get that money."

"Gee, that's swell," I said. "I wouldn't be afraid to try it with someone who knew the ropes. I could leave here any night after two. If I got back before four no one would ever know I was gone. A perfect alibi."

"Man, that's what I mean about amateurs," he said, disgusted with me. "You just don't think. The night you ducked out of here to pull a job would be just the time someone came around looking for you. If I do this job, I'll do it alone. I don't want no amateurs around to

panic on me and blow it."

"Well, where do I come in? It was my idea, remember."

"That's where you come in," he told me. "For fingering the joint and telling me the layout you're doing part of the work, so you get part of the loot. Now, where did you say this roadhouse was?"

"Just outside of town. About ten miles out on highway—oh, no you don't. It won't be that easy, buddy. Once I tell you where the place is, you don't have any more use for me."

"You don't trust me, huh? How are we going to work together if you don't trust me?"

"Who says we have to work together? It's my idea. I'll wait awhile and do it myself sometime."

"Ah, you don't have the guts for it. You said so yourself. You need someone like me to do the job."

"And you need me to point out the easy mark. But once I do that, you don't need me. You'll just take the money and disappear."

"That's why no one wants to work with amateurs," he said sadly. "Haven't you ever heard the expression 'honor among thieves'? If we work together, I'll pull the job and come right back here and give you your share."

"Sure you will. Except, as

you pointed out, I'm not a thief—not yet. No, there's no way we can agree. I don't trust you and you don't trust me. We might as well forget the whole deal. Unless—”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you give me my half now. In advance.”

“Give you—are you out of your head?” he shouted at me. “What do you think, I go around sticking up gas stations for a hobby? Where would I get that kind of money?”

“Yeah, I guess you're right,” I said. “We'd better forget the whole thing. We can't work together, and I need the money too bad to let you walk off with it alone.”

He stalked around the office of the station for a minute, glaring at me. Then, abruptly, he was over his fit of anger.

“You want that money pretty bad, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah, real bad. I'm getting married.”

“All right, and I want to do the job because maybe my share will be enough so I can afford to rob that bank I was telling you about. But neither of us will get anything this way. You can't do it yourself, you don't have the nerve or the knowhow. I can't do it because I don't know where the place is.”

“So what are we going to do? You don't want me to work

with you, and I'm certainly not going to give away an idea I may be able to use someday.”

“I think I've got the answer to that. You don't give the idea to me, you sell it to me.”

“Sell it?”

“Sure. You sell me the information you have about the place. That way, at least you'll get something out of it. I'll check it out, and if it looks right, I'll pull the job. If it doesn't, I'll go back to my regular business. I'll be taking all the risk, see? Tell you what, if the take is as good as you say it'll be, I'll even guarantee to give you a percentage of it. Now what could be fairer than that?”

“Well . . .”

While I hesitated, he began rummaging through his pockets and dropping handfuls of crumpled bills on the counter beside the cash register.

“Sorry,” he said apologetically, “it's the only money I have. This was the fourth station on my list for tonight. I haven't had time to get these straightened out.”

He broke open a couple of bank deposit envelopes similar to the one he had taken from me, sorted the bills according to denomination, and counted them out. It came to something over five hundred dollars.

“That's the best I can do,” he

said at last. "How about it? Remember, an idea you can't carry out isn't worth anything at all to you."

At the sight of all that money lying in neat stacks on the counter I capitulated. I told him how to get to Aunt Rosemary's roadhouse, drew him a floorplan of the place, and told him what hours it was most likely to be empty. He had what he wanted and was ready to leave when I stopped him at the door.

"Hey, what about the filling station's money?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. Almost forgot. Guess I can't stick you up, now that we're partners. Honor among thieves, and all that." He put the money and the envelope he had taken on the counter beside the cash register. Then with a casual salute he said, "So long, Mac. See you by the end of the week and let you know how we stand."

I didn't see him by the end of the week, or by the end of the next week, either.

Barbara Ann and I used part of the five hundred dollars to rent a cabin at the lake for a week's honeymoon. I managed to get in some fishing and had pretty good luck. When we got

back to town, we rented a new apartment and had enough money left over to make a downpayment on some provincial furniture she wanted.

What I forgot to tell my partner was that Aunt Rosemary is a widow. Her husband was a cop, and for years she's been feeding all the state and county cops in the district. There's always at least one team of patrolmen in the back room of her place, putting away a free meal and shooting the breeze. But I guess he's found that out by now, one way or another.

For me, things haven't changed much. I'm still working nights here in the filling station, and not making any more money at it than ever. Only now I have a wife to support, and Barbara Ann has had to quit her job, and the baby is on the way . . .

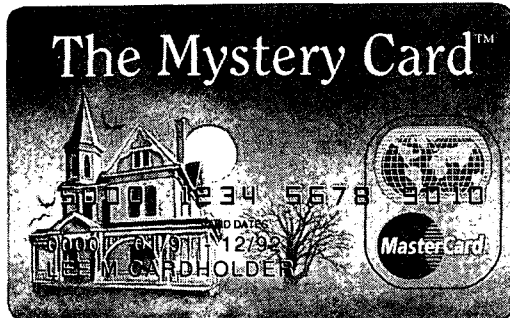
Well, I see that somebody is coming into the place, so you'll have to excuse me for a minute. Here we go again.

"All right, Mac, this is a—"

"Yeah, I know. Press the NO SALE key on the cash register. The bank deposit envelope is behind the oil cans on the second shelf. Say, that's a real nice disguise you got there, buddy."

Your Passport to Intrigue

Apply for the new "Mystery Card" MasterCard!



"Every time you use 'The Mystery Card,' a percentage of the amount charged goes to support the pioneering medical research of the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation at no extra cost to you."

Joel Davis — President,
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.

Put some "Mystery" into your everyday life.

Use the MasterCard for Mystery Readers.

No annual fee*

*(for the first year, and later depending upon usage.)

Annual Percentage Rate for Purchases	Variable Rate Information	Grace Period for Repayment of the Balance for Purchases
Variable Rate 16.4%	Your Annual Percentage rate may vary. The Rate is determined by adding 7.9% to the New York Prime Rate as published in the <i>Wall Street Journal</i> on the first Friday of the preceding month.	Not less than 25 days
Method of Computing the Balance for Purchases	Annual Fee	Minimum Finance Charge
Two-cycle Average Daily Balance Excluding New Purchases	\$20.00*	50¢ If it would otherwise be greater than zero and less than 50¢

Other Charges

Over-the-Credit-Limit Fee: \$15
Cash Advances: 2% (minimum \$2, maximum \$10)
Return Check Fee: \$15
Late Payment Fee: 5% of each payment due or \$5, whichever is lower

***There is no Annual Fee for the first year.**

The \$20 Annual Fee will be waived in subsequent years for card accounts with total annual purchases in the previous year of at least \$6,500.

The information about the costs of the cards described in this application is accurate as of June 1991.
This information may change after that date.

To find out what may have changed, call us at (406) 761-8922 or 1-800-735-5536,
or write to BanCard Corporation of Montana, P.O. Box 5023, Great Falls, Montana 59403-5023.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Mystery Card™

MasterCard®

APPLICANT INFORMATION					001-003-00003
FIRST NAME	INITIAL	LAST NAME			
DATE OF BIRTH / /	SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER - -		HOME PHONE () -		
ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	YEARS THERE	
PREVIOUS ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	YEARS THERE	
PRESENT EMPLOYER			WORK PHONE () -		YEARS THERE
PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year)			WORK PHONE () -		YEARS THERE
GROSS ANNUAL INCOME* \$	TOTAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS (INCLUDE HOME, CAR, PERSONAL, CREDIT CARD LOANS, ETC.) \$		PREFERRED CREDIT LIMIT \$		
NEAREST RELATIVE NOT LIVING WITH ME		RELATIONSHIP	TELEPHONE () -		
CO-APPLICANT INFORMATION					
FIRST NAME	INITIAL	LAST NAME			
DATE OF BIRTH / /	SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER - -		HOME PHONE () -		
ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	YEARS THERE	
PREVIOUS ADDRESS	CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE	YEARS THERE	
PRESENT EMPLOYER			WORK PHONE () -		YEARS THERE
PREVIOUS EMPLOYER (if with present employer less than one year)			WORK PHONE () -		YEARS THERE
GROSS ANNUAL INCOME* \$	TOTAL MONTHLY PAYMENTS (INCLUDE HOME, CAR, PERSONAL, CREDIT CARD LOANS, ETC.) \$				
<small>*Your alimony, child support and separate income need not be disclosed if you do not wish to have it considered as a basis for repaying this obligation. *Required minimum combined annual income is \$12,000.</small>					
I authorize BanCard Corporation of Montana to check my credit and employment. I agree that I will be subject to the terms and conditions of the Cardholder Agreement sent with the card.					
X _____ Applicant's Signature		X _____ Co-Applicant's Signature		Date	
Please mail this application or a photocopy to: BanCard Corporation, P.O. Box 5023, Great Falls, Montana 59403-5023.					

Alectryon Slept

by S. S. Rafferty

His name is Donald Jaffee; occupation, lieutenant, NYPD Homicide; avocation, to put me, Chick Kelly, in Slamsville for an eon or two. Time, about midnight on a hot, humid August Monday. Place, the back seat of an unmarked prowler parked in front of the saloon-cum-boîte I own on Third Avenue.

It's not that I'm inhospitable; I can't invite him inside because the ASPCA is still looking for a deadly snake, or think they are. The snake is the least of my problems. I also have a dead man in the cellar Jaffee wants me to explain about.

"Look, Kelly, I'm not trying to hang something on you, but this is a damn peculiar business, so why don't you shed some light?"

Him, I don't trust. You, I do, so I'll let you in on the whole thing. Besides, Jaffee isn't shaking me. The most he can do is lock me up for raising chickens inside city limits.

A snake, a corpse, and a chicken—it sounds pretty nutty, I know, but it happened this way.

* * *

If I were irrational, unfair-minded, and seeking a scapegoat, I would say the whole mess was Jack MacCarthy's fault. But I'm none of those things—and it's *still* Jack Mac's fault.

Jack MacCarthy is my kitchen manager. Anyplace else in town, he'd be called a steward, but something strange happens to people once they come to work for Chick Kelly. They want titles. They want recognition. Jack Mac is supposed to be responsible for the purchase and inventory control of all the liquor and food that comes into the place and all the garbage that goes out. But that's not enough for him. He wants to be a *sommelier*.

I looked up at him from behind the desk in the back office with a wide swath of incredulity on my face.

"What do I need a wine steward for? Maybe you're going to serve Guido personally, huh?"

Guido LaSalle is my head chef. He likes titles, too. He also likes wine. Cheval Blanc '49 at thirty-four dollars the

bottle, to be exact. Guido pejoratively calls himself a *grilliarde* because he resents the fact that I insist on running a steak-and-chops menu. So Guido defers to me, but not without dreaming up some nutty European rule that since a *grilliarde* is working over hot coals all evening he is entitled to all the wine needed to replenish his loss of body fluid. I don't know, folks, I'm content to be what I am—a comic who was smart enough to get off the club circuit and open my own place. Do I run around listing myself as a *cafetier comique*?

"Guido can get his own wine," Jack MacCarthy said. "Chick, we're missing the boat on not pushing wine. The markup is terrific. Look, all the swells that come in here, they're saying to themselves, 'Would I love a bottle of Pouilly Fume '69 right now.' Only all we've got on the wine list is Dom Perignon and some Mums."

"That's chopped liver?"

"For champagne it's fine, but what about the burgundies, the bordeaux? What's fall without a new beaujolais?"

Next he'd be breaking into a song a la Chevalier. But I couldn't just give him a flat "no" because Jack Mac thinks I'm the greatest thing since four-wheel brakes. I have no

doubt that he knows good wine—he's worked the best private clubs in town—but the thought of little Jack Mac, all five feet three of him, putting on a *sommelier* chain and rattling off vintages in fractured French was too ludicrous. However, I am not without tact.

"Look, Jack Mac, I appreciate that you want to up the income around here, but be practical. To stock a good cellar would take thousands of dollars, which I don't have. Besides, the society crowd—like, say, Jay Porter Pembert—have their own private cellars that would make anything we could come up with look silly."

All the wide grin on his face lacked was canary feathers. He leaned across the desk and gave me a mock sock on the jaw.

"Gotcha that time, champ," he said, and went into what was obviously a well-rehearsed pitch. "Here's the thing of it, Chick. We don't have to stock a thing. We let Mr. Pembert and his friends bring in their own stock and keep it in our cellar. Ready for the beauty part?"

I wasn't, but what the hell.

"The beauty part is that we collect a storage-and-corkage fee. The wine cellar's half empty now, so it don't cost you zip."

Suddenly from the couch

came a voice like a rising oracle who has spent two hundred years in the Bronx. Barry Kantrowitz, my former agent when I was on the road, and present partner, surfaced from a nap.

"It's an idea with possibilities," he yawned. Big deal. By Barry, the Edsel had possibilities.

"You left a call for nine P.M., sir," I told him, "and it's only eight thirty."

"I mean it, Chick," he said, sitting erect, rubbing his bald spot and paunch with either hand at the same time. His wife Sylvia should get the Croix de Guerre for facing *that* every morning. "Jack and Charlie's have done it for years. It's a good traffic-building gimmick."

So they went to work on me. They even got Ling, my *maitre d'* (by me the headwaiter), and Cuz, the head bartender, to help with the barrage. Two days later, I gave in, but not without some points for my side. First, no storage-or-corkage fees. Second, no *sommelier* chain for Jack Mac. (Did you ever see a grown man cry?) Third, Jack Mac had to go to day classes in French at Berlitz.

I thought the last caveat would kill the whole idea. But he swallowed it, and we were in the wine cellar business—and eventually in deep trouble.

* * *

So there I was on a Saturday night, scouting for clients. My first nibble was from Digby Lawler, a southern gentleman who owns half of Virginia but gets bored with running "Daddy's old place" and spends every other week in his pied-à-terre on Park Avenue.

Lawler thought it was a "mightah fine ideeah," and so did Randy Brooks, who only owns one-quarter of New Jersey, but whose real estate has nice big manufacturing plants on them that turn out Brooks Products International. That's a euphemism for fertilizer and other chemicals.

Both guys were at the bar talking about crop rotation, nitrates, and such when I mentioned the deal to them.

"In fact, Chick, Ah'd deem it a favoah," my FFV says. "The storage space is limited at the apartment." I'll bet it is. Wall-to-wall broads.

"You know, Kelly, I might be interested in off-loading some of my lesser stock."

We all took a gander at the speaker with the cigarette holder. There in the flesh was Niles Paine, who is aptly named. He is, in the neck and other anatomical areas. Paine is a professional dilettante. But he qualifies for pro status in that he writes a column on art

for some la-de-da magazine and is a consultant up at the museum, so even if I don't like him I can use him as a patron of my wine cellar. People like to follow those they believe to be arbiters of good taste.

"Well, men," I said, "that's great. Look, let's go down and look at the facilities."

We were just walking out of the bar lounge when someone poked me in the back. I turned to find Tossi Barbera standing there, smiling sheepishly.

"I couldn't help overhearing you at the bar, Chick—about the private wine cellar you're starting. Look, I'll pay a thou up front to get in on the action."

I tell you—once a poor boy, always a poor boy. Even though Tossi has made millions in importing olive oil and could buy and sell most people, he still acts like a downstairs maid around "society." Tossi built his pile all on his own and didn't need to back off from the likes of Lawler, who inherited every foot of land he owns from dubious ancestors, nor did he owe any deference to Randy Brooks. As for Niles Paine, Tossi spends in tips what that snob knocks down telling art collectors what's *in* this season.

"Tossi, you don't need any front money. If you've got wine, I've got the space."

"Well, I got to level, Chick.

I'm just getting into wine collecting. I got this guy who recommends to me, but I'd like to get close to those heavy hitters you're signing up. You know, I could learn from them. I can see what they stock, and I can follow suit."

"Sure. Come on, Tossi, before you run out and buy a polo pony and break your neck."

Of course, I keep calling it the cellar, so you're probably visualizing a musty old tomb with cobwebs and such. It's really a finished basement with tiled decking. At the front end are the vegetable and meat reefers. Along the left wall are the shelves, for canned goods and staples. On the right wall is the liquor lockup, and at the back end is the walk-in wine cellar, which is thermostatically controlled. I've been down there twice in my life, but standing there looking at it then, I was thinking I had the swingingest bomb shelter in town.

I was showing my foursome the thickness of the wine cellar door when we all heard it at once. It was a weird sound, like a high chuckle.

"Better not be mice," I told them, "not with all the money I pay out in exterminator fees. Now you can see, fellows, that there's plenty of room in here for . . ."

"Yeawk, yeawk," the sound came again.

"Sounds like someone heckling my act," I joked it up.

"Sounds like a roostah to me, Chick old boy."

We backed out of the wine cellar and started over toward the staples shelves. The "yeawks" were lower now, and hard to follow.

"Seem to be coming from over here," Randy Brooks said, digging around on the third shelf from the floor. He pulled forward a square object covered with a blanket.

"Well, take it off, Randy," Lawler encouraged.

Brooks pulled the covering away and jumped back, and we were treated to the loudest cacophony of yeawks yet. A chicken had its head up through a slot in the wooden cage, and it was madder than hell.

"I think the thing is in pain," I told them. "It looks sick, too. The neck feathers are all shot."

It must have been a heavy line because Digby Lawler was fit to bust a gut with laughter.

"Now, that's what Ah call pretty sharp, Chick. Here he's got himself a fine-looking fighting cock, and he plays Ignorant Annie. It's okay, Chick, we'll keep youah secret. Hell, Ah like to watch a good cockfight myself."

"He sure is a beauty, Chick,"

Randy said, going over to the cage. "Looks like an Irish Gilder."

"Hell he is, boy," Lawler corrected him through his laughter. "His daddy had to be a Dominique, if I ever saw one. Bet you turn a good dollah on that old boy, Chick. He looks meaner than spit on a hot griddle."

"I don't know, gentlemen," Tossi Barbera said, giving the yawker the once over, "there's a Chinese strain that looks something like that."

This is unbelievable. "What are you guys, chickenologists or something?"

"I dropped a bundle or two at the old Club Gallistico in Havana before Castro took over," Barbera tell us, "and they had Chinese strains that looked like this bird."

"I believe Mr. Barbera is correct about its Chinese origins," Niles Paine said with authority. "I know nothing of cockfighting, but that rooster is found in Oriental paintings over and over again. There's a lovely print from the Ming dynasty . . ."

While he's giving the lecture, I headed for the wall phone. If you think the chicken was angry, you should have seen me. Some clown was turning my cellar into a chicken coop and making a turkey out of me

in front of the customers. To paraphrase the gentleman from Virginia, I was madder than spit on two hot griddles.

I punched the intercom button marked "Kitchen." A voice said "'Allo."

"Hello yourself. Is Jack Mac there?"

"Who's dis? Meester Chick?"

"Yeah, Julio, it's me. Get MacCarthy down here."

Julio Martinez goes silent for a moment and then he says, "You in de cellar, Meester Chick?"

"I'm on Line 5, aren't I? Where's MacCarthy?"

More silence. "Meester Chick, if you are in the cellar—you sound very *enfadado*, huh?"

"You bet your butt I'm angry. Come on, Julio, get MacCarthy!" Now I've got to explain to my own salad chef why I want to talk to my own kitchen manager!

"Perhaps, Meester Chick, you could tell me why you are so *en . . .*"

"Yeah, *enfadado*, *muy*, *tres enfadado*, damn it. What are you, Julio, the regional Torquemada? I want to ask Mr. MacCarthy if he's planning to go into the fresher-than-fresh egg business. Now, get him, pronto!"

I don't believe it! On the other end, I'm getting chuckles

from this guy. "Ho ho, Meester Chick, fresh eggs! Ho ho. Don't you know the rooster he don' lay eggs, ho ho."

"Julio, are you trying to tell me something? You know something about this blinking bird down here?"

"Sí, Meester Chick. I think I come down and 'splain."

"Yeah. Great idea, Julio. You come down and 'splain."

Niles Paine was still giving his lecture when I got back to the group.

"They go all the way back to Greek mythology, you know. The god Alectryon was ordered by Mars to guard the chamber where Mars was seducing Venus but Alectryon fell asleep, and Mars punished him by turning him into a cock that would eternally herald the sunrise."

"He's doing okay for himself right now, and it's only twelve thirty," I said, glaring at the rooster, who was arching his head and sending up another racket.

"They crow any time they feel like it, Chick," Barbera tells me.

"Yes, I can believe that." Professor Paine is in again. "In the Bible, the cock crowed . . ."

Between the damn rooster crowing and Paine slathering us with culture, I got a cross between the old Pathé news

and Sunrise Semester going down in front of me.

Lawler took me by the arm and led me aside. "Chick," he whispered, "this is one of the best setups Ah've ever seen. When do you have the faghts?"

"I don't run cockfights, I run a gin mill. Don't you know cockfighting is illegal in New York, Lawler?"

"And just about everywhere else, Chick, but that doesn't stop the sport. Hell, these birds were born to faght."

"Not in my cellar, they're not. Look, fellows, I'm sorry about this. I have a suspicion this thing belongs to one of my people—who's on his way down here by way of Staten Island from the length of time it's taking."

The ferry must have docked because the footfalls on the stairs brought Julio into view. Julio Martinez started with me three years ago as a busboy, and I promoted him to kitchen assistant. I liked the guy because he's quick-smart. Now he's my salad chef at three twenty a week. This is gratitude? This is what I get for taking in the poor, the tired, the homeless?

"'Allo, Meester Chick," he said sheepishly. "I din' think you ever came down here."

"'Splain, Julio, fast and clean."

"Well, Meester Chick—" he raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders "—I'm sorry if I make trouble. But you see, El Kelly Grande, he fight tonight and I don' wanna go alla way home to get him 'cause the match is downtown."

"El Kelly Grande!" I crowed louder than the rooster. "You named that buzzard after me?"

More sheepish smiles. "To show my gratitude. You give me a good job, good money, so when I buy *el gallo* I say I name him for you."

Lawler was back splitting a gut again and so was Randy Brooks. Very funny. I haven't minded laying a few eggs in my time, but having a chicken named after me is not my idea of affection.

"He's a top cock," Barbera said, putting his finger perilously close to El Kelly Grande's beak. "I remember once in Cuba one of these birds fought a big snake, and damned if he didn't win."

"He's one fighting machine, dat guy," Julio proudly announced.

"How many hacks has he won?" Lawler asked, and Julio looked puzzled. Then his light bulb went on.

"Hacks? Oh, the matches, *sí*. You Americans have a funny way of talkin'. He wins ninety-nine matches so far."

"With that record, he's worth a small fortune at stud," Lawler said with a low whistle.

"A chicken gets stud fees?" Paine finally doesn't know something in this world.

"Hell, yes," Lawler went on, "that old boy would produce a string of golden eggs. You must be doing pretty good on side bets, eh, Julio?"

My salad chef gave a slight grin.

"I do okay. Not as good as in the beginning when I could get better odds. Now he has the reputation, the *fama*."

I'm thinking, ain't life grand? I have put money into racehorses that had hearty appetites and slow legs. I've backed pugs who grew canvas mold on their backs. But here I give an immigrant a good job and he parlays it into a roll with a bird that lives on a handful of corn. I noticed a ten pound sack of chickenfeed on the shelf and bemoaned all the hay I had paid for.

"The only trouble is, you could maim your champion in a snap," Randy Brooks said, fondling a mean-looking set of curved wires embedded in what looked like brass. "Suppose he gets killed?"

"Hispanics don't fight the cocks to the death alla time."

"Well, these are pretty sharp gaffs, Julio . . ."

"Oh, the *postiza*—the spurs. Those are just good luck charms. They are in my family for years. I hang them in his cage to keep in his mind that I can send him to death in an American match. Hispanics use plastic *postiza*. They can cut, kill sometimes, but it is rare."

"Most humane." Niles Paine studied the brass spurs with interest. "These would tear an opponent to shreds. You know, the Latin mind really understands the classic struggle for survival, and portrays it through beautiful symbology. The *corrida de toros*, *las peleas de gallos*. Take bull-leaping in ancient Greece—"

I cut him off with an invitation to all for drinks up in the bar. They all went ahead, leaving me and Julio alone. Excuse me, also with El Kelly Grande.

"I ought to wring two necks in this cellar, Julio, only his looks tougher. Get that thing out of here tonight before we all get pinched."

I started up the stairs, then stopped and turned to him. "Why the hell did you name the bird after me, Julio? I'm a card-carrying coward."

"No, Meester Chick, you are no *manilo*." He gave me a curious wink. "I named him after you—how do I 'splain in English?—we have a saying, there

are only two creatures in the world who are not sad after making love, the rooster and the human female.”

I turned and just kept climbing. I could have told him that *we* have a saying in English, but why kick a compliment in the teeth?

That was Saturday night, and since I close the place on Mondays during July and August, I opted for a long weekend. That was my first mistake. I took Jeepers to an estate party out on the Island and managed to get myself broiled medium rare in the sun. When we got back to the city around noon on Monday, I bade the world goodbye and locked myself in the pad. Jeepers wanted to play nurse, but I hate that action so I packed her off to a girlfriend's for the night.

I finally fell asleep around seven o'clock after basting myself in white vinegar until I smelled like one of Julio's tart salads. By ten, the phone was clanging me into painful consciousness. It was Barry. A very upset Barry.

“Chick, you'd better come down to the club right away.”

From the seriousness of his tone, I thought the joint must have burned down. (At least I hoped so. I've got a hell of a fire insurance policy.)

“What's happening, Barry? I can hardly move with this sunburn.”

“It'll look better if you come, Chick. Jaffee will only come and get you.”

“Jaffee? Homicide?”

“Joe Tooms, the night man, came in as usual around nine to get set up for tomorrow . . .”

“Barry, I know what Tooms's job is! Who's dead?”

“Julio. Get down here, will you, Chick? Jaffee is scaring the hell out of me.”

When I got to the club, Barry called to me from the back of Jaffee's prow, which was parked at the curb.

“Get in, Kelly,” Jaffee said and then proceeded to give me the score. It was a crazy tale. Tooms found Julio lying on the cellar floor around nine o'clock and called an ambulance. Julio was dead when they got to him.

“The kid's an intern, but he knows what he's talking about because he's from Nevada and has seen death by snakebite before,” Jaffee said from the front seat. “The precinct people weren't taking any chances and called the ASPCA to look for the snake—which they can't find.”

While I had visions of a serpent slithering around my cellar, Jaffee went on to explain how Julio had two fang marks on his right hand and had prob-

ably died between seven and eight o'clock. Jaffee stopped his spiel when two men walked up to the car window. I recognized the shorter one as Dr. Mo Glickman, an assistant M.E. He introduced his companion as Dr. Draper, an ophiologist from the Bronx Zoo. Why anyone would want to spend his life fooling around with snakes is a mystery. to me, but Draper seemed to know his stuff.

"Well, lieutenant," he said, leaning in the front window, "it sounds crazy, but from the size and angle of the puncture I'd swear it was a cobra strike. I can't imagine why the man handled one. Excuse me, but I want to give the ASPCA people a hand in there. They're not experienced in this sort of work. We've covered the entire restaurant already, but there are a number of places it could coil up."

That was just dandy to hear. I thought of what it would do to my business. Eating at Chick Kelly's would be like something out of Gunga Din.

When Glickman and Draper walked away, Jaffee looked at Barry and me. "You two can start working on the lies you're going to tell me."

I gave him a squint. "I thought you handled homicides, Jaffee. This looks like an accident to me."

"Sure, salad chefs all over town play with cobras. Something is fishy about this, Kelly, and anywhere *you're* concerned, I'm interested."

I ignored him. "Has anyone bothered to tell his wife, Barry?"

"I thought you'd want to do it."

"Sure, all the dirty work is left to yours truly. Next you'll want me to catch the snake."

Jaffee jumped in again. "I'm going to see her, but I'll take you up on the snake offer. Did this Martinez have any enemies on your staff?"

I told him no to that and thirty more questions about Julio, got out of the car, and watched him drive away.

"Chick," Barry said, "I'm very confused. It's nuts. A snake!"

"I can trap it in a way, Barry. The other night Tossi Barbera mentioned a snake versus a gamecock match, and maybe it gave Julio an idea."

"Gamecock?"

I explained El Kelly Grande and the whole bit for him. He looked floored.

"What gets me is that none of the staff knew he had the rooster in the cellar."

"I can dope that one for you, Chick. Julio is probably the only person who ever went into the cellar. Anytime one of the

cooks wanted something, he was like a jack-in-the-box with 'I get it.' You know kitchen help, if they have an obliging gofer they take advantage. I'm thinking, though—if he was a big winner with the bird, maybe he got in wrong with the gamblers."

"I'll go you one better, Barry. He was putting poison on the rooster's beak, and the thing pecked him on the hand."

"Why would he put poison on the bird's beak?"

"Maybe that's how El Kelly Grande won ninety-nine fights. He'd peck his opponent, and it would drop dead from the poison and not the fighting. Only my theory is full of holes."

"Why?"

"Jaffee never mentioned the rooster's being in there, and he would have, believe me."

The ASPCA man and Dr. Draper were coming out of the club—empty-handed.

"Damned if we can find it, Mr. Kelly. We've turned the place inside out."

"Terrific. What do I do now? Close down until the thing gets hungry and rings for room service?"

"I'm beginning to question whether there ever was a snake. It could have been a sharp prong of some kind; but that would make it murder."

"Yes, doc, that's why Jaffee

was nosing around. But just in case there is a snake in here, could you lend me a mongoose for a few days?"

By golly, he did it—two of them. I closed down the club for two days and gave them the run of the place. Dr. Draper finally came to the conclusion that, if there had been a snake, it had somehow gotten out of the building, or had been taken out by whoever brought it in. This brought Jaffee back into my young life with more questions than a loan department. I kept my mouth shut on several counts: One, I like making his life difficult; two, I learned some things at Julio's wake that I wanted to keep to myself; three, I was doing a little detective work myself.

If Julio's sendoff was typical of Hispanic wakes, they are all pretty grim affairs. I paid my respects to the distraught widow, sat among the mourners for a respectable ten minutes, and started to make tracks. She caught up with me as I was going down the funeral parlor stairs.

"Mr. Kelly," she said, "may I have a word with you?"

She could have forty million words with me if she wanted them. If they ever cast *Blood and Sand* or *The Mark of Zorro* again, she's down for the raven-

haired beauty's part. She had skin like a tree-ripened nectarine. Where she got the blue eyes from was probably a genetic mystery, but they sure went swell with the overall appearance.

"I'm Constanzia Della Verce, Julio's sister-in-law. I'm looking after things because my sister is near collapse."

"I'm sorry for your trouble," I said, using mankind's dumbest cliché. "Did my accountant get in touch—"

"Yes, it was most generous of you."

"His employee insurance money should clear in a couple of days, and if there's anything else I can do—"

"There is. I'd like to pick up the gamecock sometime in the next few days."

I gave her a puzzled look.

"It's still at your club, isn't it, Mr. Kelly?"

"No, it's not. What makes you think I have it?"

"Not *you* personally, but he always kept it there. My sister wouldn't have it in the house."

"That's news to me, Constanzia, but—"

"Connie, please. My sister and I were born here."

"Okay, Connie. I have a suspicion that Julio probably did house the bird in my cellar, but it wasn't there when his body was found. I only saw it once in

my life, and told him to get it out of there. Someone else must have been keeping it for him. Have you checked his friends?"

"He wouldn't have trusted anyone with that animal. That's why he hid it in your club. He told me so. There's something else." She hesitated and darted her eyes around the street. "Can we go someplace less public?"

I took her elbow and walked her across 110th Street to Third Avenue, where we found a little mastrador called Vinny's. The jukebox was pouring out crazy salsa rhythms and I thought to myself as I followed Connie's back to a booth that she could probably dance a mean foxy-trot hustle. I had VTNL as usual; she ordered coffee.

"Well, Connie?"

"If you say you don't have the gamecock, I guess it complicates things."

I asked how.

"Well, I can't sell it, and ten thousand dollars would help my sister and her three kids a lot."

"Someone offered ten G's for the rooster?"

"Yes. After Julio was murdered."

"The cops haven't called it murder, Connie. Not yet."

"That Lieutenant Jaffee is so dumb."

I smiled appreciatively.

"Asking all sorts of questions about voodoo rites and snake handling. He's crazy."

"But you didn't bother to tell him about the rooster, did you? I have an idea that Julio's bird had a string of wins because he was putting poison on its beak, and—"

She laughed, tossing her head back to catch more air for the lusty expression of amazement. Then she stopped and leveled her blue eyes at me. "Poor gringo. Before any match, the referee always pours water over the cock's beak and forces him to swallow. If poison has been used, the bird dies. Besides, if Julio had been pecked accidentally, where is the bird?"

She was right, of course—unless the rooster got out of the building the same way Jaffee's mythical snake did. Even the cage was gone. In fact, I had found nothing except the ten pound bag of chicken chow which sparked my original suspicion that El Kelly Grande had been a permanent resident in the cellar.

"No," she went on, "Julio was murdered for the cock, the money, or both."

"Money?"

She rooted in her purse and came up with a small book that looked as if it could be used for

addresses. When she showed it to me, I saw it had a different function—it was a record of winnings over a ten month period, amounting to over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

"That's why I said nothing to the police. There's a hundred and fifty thousand in illegal money somewhere, but I don't know where. I went through all Julio's things. No bankbook, no safety deposit key, no money." Her voice took on a dejected tone. "Now you tell me the bird is gone, too. It leaves my sister with nothing. Why don't you want to share, Mr. Kelly? Must you have it all?"

Her last question had the effect of a solidly placed kidney punch. This dame had maneuvered me.

"Look, Miss Della Verce, if you're looking for a patsy, you just hummed the wrong tune. I don't have the bloody bird or Julio's profits. One thing I do have is a gold-plated alibi. I was lying on my belly with a sunburned back when Julio died. But why futz around? Let's go down to Center Street and get a referee named Jaffee. He can pour water on both our faces, and we can see which of us has the poison on his tongue."

Her neck muscles and veins went rigid, betraying some inner tension and maybe a possi-

ble eruption, which was the last thing I needed. Then the tide came back into her eyes and dampened her fight, but not her spirit.

"That stupid greenhorn!" she sobbed. "Lots of second generation boys my sister could have married, but she wanted this dumb canewhacker. Now he's dead and she has an apartment full of kids—and someone else has the hundred and fifty thousand and a valuable game-cock."

I handed her a paper napkin from the dispenser, and she blotted her tears. "Julio was always singing your praises like a god, so I thought you had something to do with it. He called the bird after you, he kept it at your place. It's natural to come to conclusions."

"Yeah, second generation conclusions, Connie. Greenhorns know how to trust people, it's an old American custom. Now look, Connie. *Look* at me!" She did. "Julio was riding high with the bird. He probably had more enemies than he could count. Losers are like that. Whoever killed him obviously took the money and the bird. The cops could ask questions all over the barrio until they're hoarse, but no one is going to tell them zip."

"I know, Chick, I know that here." Her hands went to the

fullness of her breast. "There's nothing now."

"Maybe not. I've been sitting here trying to figure out why one of Julio's enemies would take the bird. It would be recognized if it were put into a match, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Who offered to buy the bird? Anyone you know?"

"A man named Lawler, Digby Lawler. I have his phone number."

I was telling myself that I had his number, period. It was dumb of me not to have hit on it sooner. If Julio hid the bird at the club, even from my staff people, then only five people knew where it had been—me, Lawler, Barbera, Randy Brooks, and Niles Paine. The bird had no value in the pits, but it did as a stud—Lawler had even remarked on it when we were in the cellar. But it was still nuts. A wealthy gentleman farmer doesn't knock off a little guy like Julio over a chicken, or over a hundred fifty thousand dollars, which might have been stashed at the club. I told Connie to hang loose for a few days, left her back at the funeral parlor, and headed back to the club—to find Jaffee camped in my office. As I said, I'm playing detective, too, so he gets nothing from me. Does Macy's tell Gimbels?

"How are we doing, lieutenant? Arrest the snake yet?"

"I think I may be looking at one, Kelly. Where were you between seven and ten o'clock Monday night?"

"Home with a sunburn, which is just fine now, thanks. Just a bit itchy."

"And of course some broad will swear to it."

I shrugged and sat behind the desk. He was trolling for something because Jaffee doesn't waste time.

"You know, information is hard to come by in this town, especially in the barrio, but if you dig long enough—"

"Yeah, I hear you're into voodoo."

"No, funnyboy, I'm into chickens—gamecocks, to be exact. Seems you are, too."

"I like mine broiled with lemon butter."

"Keep joking. Maybe you'll die laughing. Julio Martinez owned a fighting cock that seems to have disappeared. My information says you had a piece of his action—maybe all of it. The bird was named El Kelly Grande. A lot of money goes down at these fights, and Julio was racking up quite a string of victories. Maybe he was holding out on you. The bird was kept here."

"Who told you that fairy tale?" I had a feeling Constan-

zia had decided not to hang loose after all.

"No one had to tell me. Cops catalogue things at a death scene, and one of the items was a ten pound bag of chicken corn, which I don't see on your menu."

"Now let me get the scenario straight, lieutenant. Successful restaurateur/entertainer wants to knock off alleged partner, so he lures the poor guy into his cellar, whips out his pet cobra, says, 'Sic 'em, Rollo,' then takes the chicken upstairs and broils it in butter and lemon and eats the evidence—maybe I even ate the snake. Sure, let's go all the way."

"That's not bad, Kelly."

I get nervous when he gets cute.

"There are only a few flaws. First, strike the 'successful' before 'restaurateur.' You're up to your elbows in debt. Second, there never was a snake—only this."

He reached down on the floor and took up a long two-tined serving fork. There are at least six of them in the kitchen.

"These are your fangs. The tines are dipped in snake venom."

"Has that got venom on it? I mean, I wouldn't want you to stick yourself."

"No, you washed it clean

enough, the same as you did with the glass you used to give Martinez the mickey. Autopsies are very thorough. You drugged him and then dreamed up this snake canard just to confuse the issue."

"What's on reel five, lieutenant? Your fantasy is weak so far."

"That's going to be my surprise ending, and I hope you don't like it," he said, getting to his feet.

"Let me know how it turns out."

"You'll be the first to know."

When his fat back had disappeared from the doorway, Barry's fat front took its place.

"That guy scares me," he said as I thumbed through the phone book under the D's. Dr. Robert Draper seemed to be one of the few municipal employees who actually lived in the city. I dialed his number.

"Oh yes, Mr. Kelly, how are you?"

"Swell, doctor. How are the mongeese?"

"Fine. I hear they enjoyed their stay."

"Any time, doc. Maybe I'll send them to camp next summer. Look, I have a personal interest in the Martinez death because he worked for me. Jaffee says that he wasn't bitten by a snake, but was pricked with a sharp instrument dipped in

venom. Where in hell would someone get snake venom in New York City?"

"At the zoo. We milk some of the reptiles for antivenom serum. We don't produce it ourselves, however. It's sold to chemical companies and some universities for research purposes."

"Do you know who it's sold to?"

"Well, offhand it's hard to say. The records are at my office. I know Columbia takes some, and I think Princeton, but I'm not sure. No, wait, that's a joint venture with the Brooks Labs in Camden."

"Brooks International! I thought they made fertilizer and stuff like that."

"They do, but they have a small medical research subsidiary. More window dressing for public relations purposes."

I was wondering if Randy Brooks also used it for private relations purposes. "Why would some lab want to make anti-cobra venom?"

"Oh, your man was killed by rattlesnake venom. Didn't Jaffee tell you?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do with that man," I said in mock desperation. "He doesn't tell me anything. Thanks, doc. Love to all the gang in the Bronx."

I hung up feeling pretty chip-

per. Things were beginning to jell for old Kell. Randy Brooks had access to the venom, and he knew about Julio's prize bird. He also knew something about fighting cocks. But, just as in Lawler's case, a motive was hard to figure. Both guys were loaded. Maybe El Kelly Grande was worth killing purely for ownership, like the guys who buy stolen paintings they can never show to anyone. For that matter, Old Digby could milk a rattler down on his plantation. I went out front to the bar for a nightcap—and got another surprise.

Tossi Barbera was nursing a brandy when I walked up to him.

"Hello, Tossi, you're becoming a real regular around here."

"Nice place, nice people. Actually, I wanted to see you, Chick. I read about that fellow's death. A strange thing. A snake?"

"That's what the police say."

"I hear he's got a family, too."

"Yeah, a bunch of kids"

"Maybe we could help."

"Who's we? I'm already helping."

"Brooks and myself." He leaned closer to my ear. "It's kind of a secret, Chick, but Brooks has one of the fanciest cockpits you ever saw on his estate in Jersey. They bet very

large numbers over there. All gentlemen, you understand." Tossi the poor boy looking in. "After we all saw that bird the other night, I had a talk with Brooks, and we figured we'd offer this Julio guy twenty-five G's for him. You know, we form a little combine, make a little money, and have a little fun."

"Did he turn you down?"

"We never got to make the offer. We'd still like to have the bird, and we hoped you'd talk to the widow for us. It's a good deal for them, Chick. Ten thousand cash and fifteen thousand dollars in Brooks Products International stock."

"Right now the widow isn't talking to anyone."

"Well, see what you can do. We'll even go a finder's fee for you."

"I thought I was the only one allowed finder's fees," a voice said over our shoulders. It was Niles Paine, cigarette holder and all.

"I thought you didn't know anything about gamecocks," I said.

"Oh, gamecocks. Heaven forbid! I thought you were talking about *objets d'art*. I didn't mean to interrupt, gentlemen, but you called my office this afternoon, Mr. Barbera, and I thought—"

"Oh, yes. Randy Brooks tells me you did one hell of a job se-

lecting paintings and sculpture for his plant's lobbies and executive offices. I'd like you to do the same for my outfit."

I drifted away from them to digest this new wrinkle. Now Barbera was in the picture, but he sounded legit, unless Brooks was using him. And while I was at it, why discount Paine, except that he wouldn't know what to do with a rooster if he had it? It wouldn't be arty to be seen at a cockfight, but he might have his eye on a finder's fee.

I called Lawler's apartment on Fifth Avenue and was told by the butler that he had gone down to Virginia for a few days. After ten lies and some fancy footwork, I found out that he had left town on the night of the murder—by car, which would be the best way to transport a chicken.

I went out into the street for a breath of fresh air and of course, it being Third Avenue in August, I got none. I leaned up against the building, smoked a cigarette, and watched the midnight traffic trying to make all the green lights from here to Mamaroneck.

A car pulled up to the curb and Jaffee's ugly puss pushed itself out of the front passenger window. He motioned me over.

"Honest, officer—" I minced

up to him "—I haven't turned a trick all night."

"Cut the comedy. You saved me the trouble of looking for you. Take a look in the back seat."

I did so, not out of obedience, but curiosity. There, spread out on a tarp, was a smashed cage and the mortal remains of El Kelly Grande. Alectryon was copping the big sleep.

"Funny things you find in catch basins, Kelly, and this was in the one right around the corner. No gamecock involved, my eye. I knew you'd have to ditch it near here. You'd be pretty conspicuous walking around with it. It's starting to build against you, Kelly. All I need is a few more threads."

I talked across him to the driver, a dogrobber named Cogan. "Get this man to Bellevue pronto. The heat's got him." I turned and walked back into the club just as Paine and Barbera were leaving. Paine was rhapsodizing about how the only art for an olive oil company was Etruscan, which delighted rich-little-poor-boy Tossi. I felt sick, not because the damn bird was dead, but for Julio's family, which was out of luck.

Unless!

Back in the office on the phone, I could hear the little boy's voice yelling, "Aunt Con-

nie!" and when she got on, she sounded sleepy.

"Chick, it's late."

"Maybe *too late* unless you listen to me. Who do you know who knows a lot about fighting cocks? I mean local birds."

"My God, Chick, let me think. Well, my Uncle Coco, I guess."

"Get him and bring him to me."

"Are you crazy? He's an old man! It's what? Two thirty!"

"I'll come to him then. And Connie, see if your sister has any pictures of the bird. It's important."

"I'll call you back in ten minutes, Chick."

Señor Coco Della Verce was one of the handsomest old gents I've ever seen. His hair and mustache were white as overly refined flour and played against his strong-boned mahogany face like counterpoint. I knew now where the blue eyes came from. We were sitting at a small table at the rear of a *sociedad*, where the bond seemed to be card playing. He had a large glass of rum in front of him. Connie wore a simple white sleeveless dress that revealed light down on her arms—my nectarine had a little peach in her.

"Kelly," her uncle said, scrutinizing me. "Once, long ago in the Argentine where we come

from, there were many Irishmen." Now I really knew where the blue eyes came from. "Nice people," he said, "but drink too much." He polished off the rum and signaled for more.

Connie had brought along a pack of color Polaroids of Julio and El Kelly Grande. Many were useless because the bird was either in Julio's arms or in its cage, but one was a beauty, with the bird in profile and his plumage fluffed. I slid it across to the old man and asked him a question.

"Of course there is a cock somewhere that looks like El Grande, but to fight like him? Never. What a heart, what spirit. That, my young Irish, cannot be replaced."

"*Tío*, Mr. Kelly is second generation. He is American."

"Ah, this one—" he chided her with a forefinger—"with generations she talks. She will be her own last generation with the *dar calabazas* . . ."

Somehow my high school Spanish short-circuited, because it seemed he was talking about Connie handing out pumpkins.

The old man saw the confusion in my face.

"*Dar calabazas*. She hands a pumpkin to all suitors—she jilts them because they are not born here."

"*Tío!*" The peachy nectarine blushed.

"I tell you, young Irish," he went on, "she does not comprehend. Julio was a fine man. I knew his father and his father's father. Did you know he was descended from the Conquistadors?"

"Yeah, Mr. Della Verce, that's swell. All us Irish have a king or two knocking around in our pasts, too. But what about a double for the bird?"

Nothing comes cheap. But old *Tío Coco* knew of a farm in Texas that could help. That meant a round-trip ticket, which I considered an investment. So the next day, *Señor Della Verce* was airborne, with *Connie* riding shotgun to make sure the rum didn't deter him.

She called from *El Paso* that night. "It's remarkable, *Chick*, you'll see. The damn thing could be *El Kelly Grande's* twin. Same weight, same coloring, everything. Only it doesn't fight too well, according to *Tío Coco*. He wants to keep looking."

"Tell him no. Bring it back before the deal folds. These people only saw *El Kelly Grande* once. It's the looks that count."

"*Chick*," she said after some hesitation, "I don't like this. It's fraud, you know."

"Fraud, hell. I'm trying to trap a killer."

"How, for God's sake?"

"Because with the help of a guy called *Cordova*, I figured in the missing pieces, and all I need is that chicken. Come on, baby, fly back to *Capistrano-on-the-Hudson*."

The invitations went out that night with no suspicions aroused, I was sure.

Every once in awhile, I toss a party for my friends in the private bar in back that I call the *Pig Sty* because a women's libber once took me to court to integrate it. I lost, but somehow the ladies don't favor the tangy conversation and stay away. I invited twenty guys, but the only four I was interested in were *Barbera*, *Lawler*, *Brooks*, and *Paine*. They had all been involved with the bird from the first. One of them was a murderer, and the other three were witnesses before the fact.

The "do" was set for Friday, and everyone accepted. By nine o'clock, everything was going down great. During the festivities, *Barbera* sidled up to me.

"I guess the deal for the bird is dead, huh, *Chick*?"

I gave him my best *au contraire* stare. "Hell, no. I've got a surprise for you, bubby."

"The family agreed to sell?"

"Yep, but you and *Brooks* have some competition."

"Who, for crying out loud?"

"Lawler's in."

"I'll be damned! If you're trying to bid it up, Chick, I'll have to level with you. Lawler's on his uppers, so don't be fooled by all that country gentleman jazz. He's a bum, believe me. Land poor, as they say."

"Yeah, as they say. What do you really think the chicken is worth? Fifty G's? Sixty G's?"

"Chick—" he grinned like I could never believe a word he said "—no cock is worth that."

"Hell he isn't. I've done some research, Tossi. In the big pits, a bird can earn forty to fifty points a night, and you know it. It's just that Julio had a Seabiscuit on his hands and played him in the bush leagues. You come on strong with the Havana stuff, so you know the action is big. And Lawler's not the only bidder, so get your checkbook ready. There's an old guy here from Argentina with lots of jack and also a syndicate from the barrio."

"Chick, I think you're making a mistake. Okay, you're representing the family, but don't ace yourself out of a nice fat fee. Look, I know Brooks will go along—the original deal plus six bills for you."

"No deal, Tossi. May I introduce you to Señor Colome Manuel Della Verce."

"Coco will do," said my fake millionaire, who was, as they

say in the theater, rising to the part.

About ten o'clock, I decided it was time to move, so I got Lawler, Barbera, Brooks, and Tío Coco together, along with a guy named Carlos, who was supposed to represent the barrio syndicate. I even asked Paine along. He wanted to know what was up.

"I'm auctioning off a chicken, and I need a witness to the deal."

"How exciting."

Five minutes later, we were all in the cellar, where Jack Mac had set up a small table as a bar. When everyone had a drink, I went to the center of the floor and went into action.

"Gentlemen," I said, "we've got a bit of business here, and then we can enjoy ourselves. Four of you have put in bids for El Kelly Grande, and I'm happy to say that Julio's family has agreed to an open auction. Connie!" She came out from behind the staples shelves carrying the cage I'd had built at a woodworking shop on 74th Street. Inside was a yawking facsimile of my namesake.

"What's for openers, fellas?"

Digby Lawler sipped on a bourbon and said almost inaudibly, "Fifteen thousand."

"I think you're holding a stiff hand, my friend," I told him and looked at Brooks and Bar-

bera. Barbera bent his head to his new buddy's whisper, looked up, and said, "Thirty G's."

Carlos had a haughty look on his face as he said, "I go sixty-five, cash."

"Seventy-five," Tío Coco said pompously. He was overplaying it, but doing beautifully.

Lawler shook his head and sneered. "Hell, I could have bought a piece of Secretariat for that."

"So your checks are all on the table, Lawler?" I asked.

"Hell, Chick boy, that's a nice bird, but he's no eagle. I've never even seen the thing fight."

"But you checked him out. You *all* have."

"By reputation," Lawler countered. "Can you guarantee he's a winner?"

"I don't have to guarantee a thing, Lawler, but your bolt is shot, so what's to argue? How about it, Tossi? Seventy-five is the number."

More whispers and then Randy Brooks said, "All right, one hundred. Seventy-five in stock."

"I already have seventy-five in cash."

"Look, Kelly, are you impugning the integrity of my company's financial position? The stock will double in ten years."

"He has a point, gentlemen. Can't knock the stock. Going once, going twice."

"Hold it, Kelly." Lawler acted a little drunk. "I had a deal with the Martinez family."

"All deals are off. Going thrice, and sold to the gentleman in the grey suit and stocks and bonds."

Connie's eyes were flashing as she opened the cage and took the bird out—then dropped him to the floor.

"Watch out!" Tossi Barbera cried. "He has spurs on!"

The cock arched his wings and started scampering around the cellar floor. Lawler and Brooks tried to stop him as I herded him into a corner near the liquor lockup. "Watch it, Paine," I yelled as he picked up the bird, letting the spurs scratch his hand.

"Good God," he screamed, "I could get blood poisoning!"

"You could get more than that, Niles—maybe go rigid." I took the vial of venom that Dr. Draper got for me from my jacket pocket. Paine's face went white. "Go ahead and play it out, Niles buddy. It's just another 'accident' as far as I'm concerned."

"Are you insane, Kelly? This is murder in front of witnesses!"

"Kelly, what's going on?" Barbera shouted.

"You're watching a snake die. Look at him. His eyes are already starey. Breath getting short, Niles buddy? That's the way rattler venom works. But you should know."

"Kelly, for God's sake, get me to a hospital!"

"I can do better than that. I have the antidote, and this lady is a nurse. Tell these people why you killed Julio Martinez."

He slumped against the food locker. "This is a frameup," he bawled.

"To coin a phrase, Niles, pop-pycock. You got in touch with Julio somehow. He let you into the club. You got a mickey into him and gave him the rattler venom with a prick of some fork tines."

"Kelly!" Brooks stepped forward. "I want no part in this. If this man is dying—"

"He's dying all right, but he can save himself by talking now. He planned it well, Brooks, and you were his dupe. When Tossi told me he had decorated your manufacturing plants, that gave me an idea. He had access to the snake venom. That was the pin. You, Tossi, and Lawler—you had no motive. Rich guys don't kill for a bunch of feathers. So that left Nilesy boy."

"I know nothing of game-cocks, for the love of God! Please, Kelly!"

"I clock it for a few minutes more, Niles. You didn't want the bird, buddy, you wanted something much more valuable—something you saw that first night down here. The only thing Jaffee didn't find in the catch basin with the cage and the dead bird—the spurs."

"The spurs!" That from everybody.

"Let me introduce Dr. Carlos Cordova of the Museum of Natural History, not the barrio syndicate. Tell 'em, doc."

As he came forward, he put his hand in his pocket and took out the blowups of the Polaroids showing the spurs on the bird's cage that I had made the day after Jaffee had found the cock and the cage. "There is no doubt that the spurs shown here date back to the time of the Conquistadors. The markings on them undoubtedly prove them to have been the property of Cortez himself—"

I looked at Paine's startled face. "You shouldn't have ditched the bird and cage so close to the club, Paine, otherwise I wouldn't have put it all together. With the bird dead, it let Lawler, Barbera, and Brooks off the hook—they could only gain something if El Kelly Grande was alive. The only things missing were the spurs. The idea that Julio was killed for them sounded

whacked out, until Dr. Cordova got a peek at the pictures. You spent some time examining them that night down here. Julio told us that they had been in his family for years. I can't prove it, but I think you made Julio an offer and it made him suspicious of their worth. Whether you killed him for profit or from a desire to own a chunk of antiquity, I don't know or care."

He was holding his throat now. "All right! Give me the antitoxin, please! The spurs are at my apartment." He slumped to the floor.

"Is he dead?" Lawler asked nervously.

"No," I laughed, "he's micked. The show's over, boys, but a baldheaded lieutenant will want statements."

In the cab uptown, she snuggled into my shoulder.

"It's wonderful, Chick. Dr. Cordova says the spurs are worth a fortune."

"Yeah," I answered sullenly.

"What's the matter?"

"I never had a chicken named after me before. I'm sad. Also, I don't know what happened to Julio's winning profits."

She cackled. I swear she

cackled. "They're not lost, Chick, see?" She reached into her purse and came out with a closed fist. When she opened it, I saw a handful of sparkle.

"Diamonds?"

"I'm sure they are. Julio was converting his winnings because diamonds are easier to hide than a bundle of money."

"But where did you find them?"

"In your cellar, dopey. The huge sack of chicken corn. Fighting cocks don't eat regular chicken feed. They're fed ground meat and hardboiled eggs and a few grains of corn a day. It would take El Kelly Grande years to finish all that corn. That made me suspicious, so I dug around in the sack while waiting for you to bring everyone down tonight."

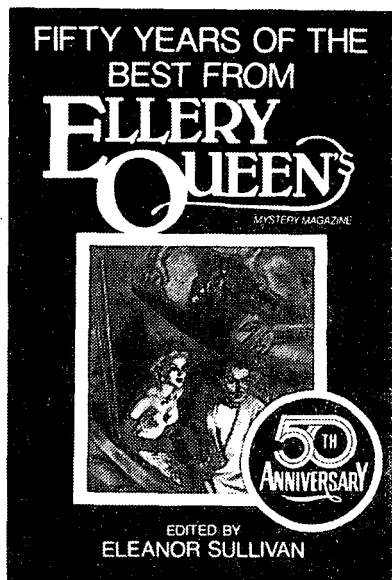
The heat was coming through the windows of the cab, salsa hot, and the sweet smell of her mingled with the torpor coming off the East River. "You're a foxy little thing," I told her.

"Takes a fox to catch a Chick," she said, turning her face up to me. "You crazy gringo."

Nectarines are luscious on August evenings, and I stopped being sad.

**NEVER BEFORE
IN A SINGLE VOLUME**

**FIVE DECADES OF THE
FINEST MYSTERY FICTION**



Outstanding stories by dozens of greats, including:
Ngaio Marsh • Hugh Pentecost • Margery Allingham
Mignon G. Eberhart • Robert Bloch • Donald Westlake
Patricia Highsmith • Stanley Ellin • Ruth Rendell
Simon Brett . . . and many others.

Please send me _____ copies of FIFTY YEARS OF THE BEST OF ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine. I enclose my check for \$_____ (\$22.95 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling for each copy.) N.Y. State residents: add 8.25% N.Y.C. sales tax to your order.

Send orders to:
Dept. 062

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
380 Lexington Ave.
New York, NY 10017

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

**REPRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED**

The Slip

by Douglas D. Armstrong

The surgical gloves gave him away. They're not usually worn with a tailored Armani suit. Unless you're a pro. Or a Beverly Hills doctor making house calls.

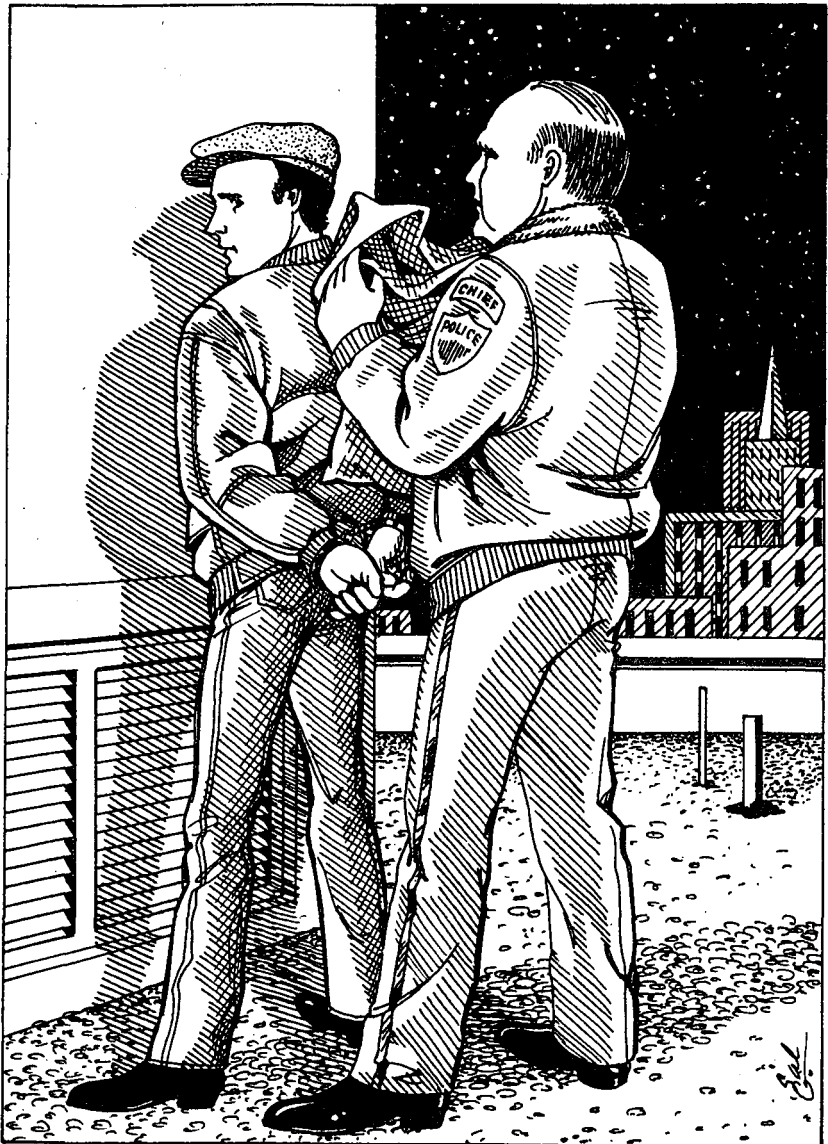
I backed away from the peephole of my apartment door as silently as I had approached it. It was barely ten o'clock in the morning. The stubble on my cheeks chafed my hands as I rubbed my stinging eyes and droopy cheeks. Friends tell me my face has character. It's just a polite way of saying all the wrinkles don't seem unpleasant to them.

I never accept visitors at this hour. And this one had not bothered to announce himself at the security door. The knuckles encased in latex knocked lightly again. I knew there would be no third knock. The clock was already ticking.

He was about six foot two, perhaps two hundred ten pounds. Athletic build. Late twenties. Jet black hair combed straight back. Sunglasses. A disturbing bulge to the coat near the left pect. He would not be alone, of course. Nobody who took the precaution of wearing gloves would leave the fire escape uncovered.

I did not touch the curtains to confirm my suspicions. I simply eased my eye slowly past the crack between the two halves of the drapes to catch a glimpse of his confederate in the alley three floors below trying to look nonchalant in a gray suit among the dumpsters in the July heat. There was no doubt in my mind that they had come for me. They had sealed both exits to assure that the visit was successful. They came equipped and determined to bag their kill.

I urged my surging adrenaline back with a deep breath and looked around my apartment. It was tidy, if a bit crowded with my antiques and collectibles. I had chosen this place for its solid, quiet construction and steam heat. Poured concrete floors and masonry walls throughout. None of that flimsy, modern stick construction for me. No sound-bleeding plasterboard or air ducts that burglars can use like highways. My privacy was too valuable, my hours too unconventional, my consciousness of security too personally acute.



IN RETROSPECT, I SHOULD HAVE TAKEN MY CHANCES IN JAIL.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The place seemed solid and secure when I rented it. It felt like a tomb with no escape when the wolf came calling.

I tried to consider my alternatives quickly. Based on the stuff I'd read, he would offer little or no conversation before he pulled the trigger. "You Jeffrey Rivett?" he'd say. Then he'd read your eyes instead of your lips. Built-in lie detector these pros seem to have.

Reasoning with him was out, given his personality type, as were evasive verbal tricks. The guy was a machine, according to the reports. Once you were locked onto his radar, you were dead meat.

I fought back the panic again. The bag was in the bedroom, I told myself. In the concealed panel of the armoire. Get it. Get dressed. Go to work. Act calmly, but with dispatch. I could hear him already starting to work on the deadbolt. It was the best lock available. It would take a while.

The effort to devise a quick burglary scheme for my own apartment felt peculiar, especially assembling the plan in reverse. But I forced myself to concentrate as I threw on dark jeans and an old black turtleneck. My wiry body was no match for him physically. Plus, I have an aversion to guns or any use of force. The challenge facing me, as a result, was to break out of my own place before the assassin at the door could break in.

My burglar tools stayed silent in their individual velvet compartments as I grabbed the heavy black canvas work bag from its hiding place. I began the tour of my apartment in the bedroom, trying to look it over again with fresh eyes. There were windows here, too, the only other exterior glass in the apartment. But they were no use. They faced the same alley.

I examined one solid wall after another, plus the ceilings and floors. As I did, the tomblike claustrophobia closed in on me again. A tomb has no telephone, of course. I considered mine when I reached the kitchen. But whom to call? I did not want to risk the life of a friend. And this was not something I could explain to the police.

You know, you expect your government to be less corrupt than you are, not more. Which is a mistake. I hadn't had any intention of irritating the remorseless psycho at my door, of course. And I might have avoided doing it had I been more cynical about the level of corruption in local politics and less naive about the ethical bankruptcy of our big city government. The trap they had set for me two weeks back was a beauty. I walked right in.

"You put down the bag, son, very slowly, and face that wall," he had said, waving the pistol like it was a traffic baton. Funny, I'd never thought of the local police chief carrying. He always seemed so passive and civilian on TV, even in his uniform. It was an odd sensation, like being arrested by a celebrity. A famous guy. Acting alone. On a rooftop. Outside an air vent I'd just used. It occurred to me I'd been set up, at the highest possible level.

"C'mon, what's this?" I asked. "Low on your quota of personal busts?" The expression on his jowly bulldog face said he was not in a mood to be trifled with. He cuffed my hands behind my back, put a hood over my head, and drove me in a dizzying circuit to an undisclosed location.

"You can cooperate with us, or you can get misplaced for a couple of years in the city jail system," a voice with rather too much threat in it told me. "It's your choice."

"The police have nothing on me," I said through the hood, disoriented, overlooking the bag on my head and the trap that had led to my predicament.

"Think again, Mr. Rivett," the voice answered. "But that is what we like about you. You don't panic easily, and you are very, very good at your work. We merely wish to employ that expertise. Unofficially, of course. And we don't want to hear you say no. That pouch of uncut stones the chief took out of your hand marked the end to your perfect crime streak, remember."

In retrospect, I should have taken my chances in jail.

Burglarizing the safe at the campaign headquarters of the mayor's election challenger ten nights later was in the arena of political dirty tricks, and I didn't care for it. I had a case of nerves. I was out of my league, and I knew it.

"You mean that crazy alderman who is screaming about law and order?" I had asked, without enjoying the irony.

"You don't know the half of it, son," the chief had said.

The safe was no problem. It opened like a can of soup. But the contents scalded me.

Strategy files, the voice had demanded, not the campaign donor list or the account books. Of course I had to look to see if what I was taking was correct. And what I saw put the target on my back. But I never expected to receive a personal visit myself.

I could hear how much progress was being made on the deadbolt, so I knew I had to hurry. I ended the tour of my apartment in the bathroom.

* * *

The next time I heard a knock at the door, I answered. Walter had arrived wearing baggy shorts, a loud floral shirt, and a very puzzled expression.

"Okay, Jeffrey, what's up?" he said. "You look like you forgot to undress last night after work."

I stuck my head out into the corridor, saw it was empty, and yanked him into the apartment.

"What are we meeting in 4J for?" he asked. "Are you ripping off the neighbors in broad daylight and calling in your old pal to take the fall?"

I started to reply, but he brushed past me to scope it out.

"Place's is a lot like yours," he reported. "Except it smells of sauerkraut. Yours smells more like pipe tobacco and brandy, you snob."

He checked out the furnishings.

"Oooh. Don't tell anyone, but I think the artwork was already stolen once. Pried off a motel wall, most likely . . ."

"Walter."

"Hey, did you notice this is exactly the same layout as your place, only in reverse. Whatzit . . . a mirror image?"

"Walter."

"So let's see, that means your apartment is just on the other side of the bedroom wall through here . . ."

"I'm sorry," I said, grabbing his arm again and speaking in low, hushed tones. "It's great you could race over here so fast on short notice for me, Walter, but we don't have time for explanations just now. Did you see anybody in the lobby?"

"No."

"On the stairs?"

"Nobody. What's going on, man? You look spooked."

I picked up my bag and led Walter by the elbow to the door. I looked both ways before pulling the door shut behind us. Then I walked him rapidly back to the stairs.

In the H-shaped layout of the building, mine is one of the two apartments on the connecting branch. But the design puts my place and the one behind it on opposite corridors. There was little chance of being seen. And I assumed the guy in the Armani threads was now exploring the inside of my apartment and wondering when I'd return.

Walter started his two-seated sports car and inserted it into traffic. "Where to?" he asked. I appreciated his matter-of-factness more than I could say, and the clear, unthreatening view of the world out of his windshield looked absolutely terrific.

"Airport."

He smiled. "You'll never get that bag of yours through security."

"You're right," I agreed. "I'll rent a car."

"Maybe you ought to tell me about this."

So I did. I didn't particularly expect him to believe it. I underestimated him.

"My God. And if that lunatic's law and order campaign was ever connected to those headline-screaming, prominent deaths? What an outrage! I can't believe it. A murder campaign to bolster your soft-on-crime smear campaign against the mayor and the police department! Why, it's . . . it's . . . absolutely depraved!"

We stopped for a light. The car muffler was sputtering, too.

"My bet," I said, "is that he will call a press conference today or tomorrow and quietly withdraw. If the mayor or the police were going to go public with this, they would have already. They seem to prefer the blackmail route."

Walter drove a while.

"Who do you think it was that set you up?" he asked eventually, "With the cops, I mean."

I had given that one some thought myself. "Most likely it was a fence. They must have put the squeeze on one, like they did me. Told him to cough up a name or do some time. Informal-like."

"And the live torpedo in your apartment?"

"Recruited from out of town."

"No, I mean what are you going to do about him?"

I frowned. "He won't give up easily. I could never match his persistence if I stayed. You know, I don't even know which side sent him. I suppose they'd both want to seal the only potential leak. It doesn't matter, ultimately. I'm a marked man in this town. Time to move on."

"What about your stuff? You want me to see to it?"

"Once you drop me off, I want you to stay as far away from anything connected to me as you can. Right now, I'm the only one that goon thinks he needs to find and erase. And, believe me, you'll discover a very different view of your possessions when your life is in the balance."

Walter let that sink in.

"Well, before you go vanish on me," he said, "could you possibly tell me one more thing?"

"Sure, unless you expect to learn the location of my safe deposit box."

"No. I got more stashed than you do. What I want to know is how you got past the torpedo to that apartment you called me from."

I laughed with the relief I was still feeling.

"You half guessed it. My apartment and the one directly behind it are exact duplicates in reverse, as it turns out. Right down to the last architectural detail. Everything in precisely the same spot. That's what saved me.

"I became so preoccupied with windows and other large openings that I practically overlooked the bathroom. There wasn't even a humidity vent in there. But then I remembered one of the few things about my place that annoyed me. Every time the guy in the next apartment rummaged around in his medicine cabinet, I could hear it in my bathroom."

Walter didn't get it. "So?"

"So I gambled with what little time I had, and explored my best hunch. I removed the screws holding my medicine cabinet in the wall. Sure enough, when I pulled it out, I found a dusty tuft of insulation stuffed behind it and then there was the back of the neighbor's cabinet."

"Voila," Walter said. He turned onto the freeway ramp and showed me some horsepower.

"Years ago when they remodeled the building, they must have cut a hole in the masonry so they could install recessed medicine cabinets that would be flush with the existing wall. A little two-by-four framing in the hold, and they had it."

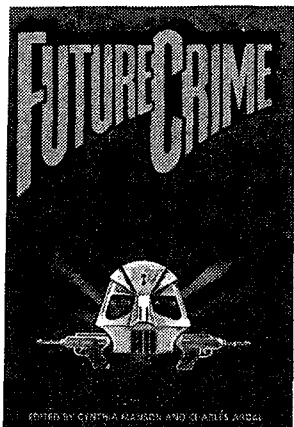
"How did you get the neighbor's cabinet out?"

"Closed my bathroom door and sawed the screws off between the sheet metal and the studs. I put my own cabinet back in after I crawled through. I used the suction cup grip and a little duct tape. I didn't want him showing up at the neighbor's apartment after he discovered my little exit door."

We drove along the final mile or two in silence.

"You'll be okay?" my loyal friend asked me.

"Yep," I grinned, feeling optimistic about the unplanned future I'd just slipped into. "I even packed all the toiletries I'll be needing for my trip."



An Anthology of the Shape of Crimes to Come

brought to you by
Davis Publications, Inc.

SAVE
OVER
25%

Both mystery buffs and science fiction fans will enjoy the fascinating tales in FutureCrime.

New stories by:
C.J. Cherryh
George Alec Effinger
Alan Dean Foster...
...and featuring stories
by: Isaac Asimov,
Robert Bloch, Orson
Scott Card, Harry Har-
rison, John Shirley,
John Varley, Larry
Niven and more!

Don't miss your oppor-
tunity to solve the
crimes of the future.

Buy directly and save over 25%
off the \$21.95 cover price!

☐ Please send me FUTURE
CRIME. I've enclosed my
check for \$15.95 (plus \$3.00 for
postage and handling).

☐ Please charge my:

☐ Visa

☐ MasterCard

☐ American Express

My Card # _____

Exp. Date _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

ST _____ Zip _____

Mail to: FUTURECRIME

P.O. Box 40

Vernon, NJ 07462

Books will be shipped by UPS. Please
allow 2-3 weeks for delivery. Outside
U.S. & Poss. add \$12. Canadian resi-
dents price includes GST.

MFFH-0

A Stranger Comes to the Village

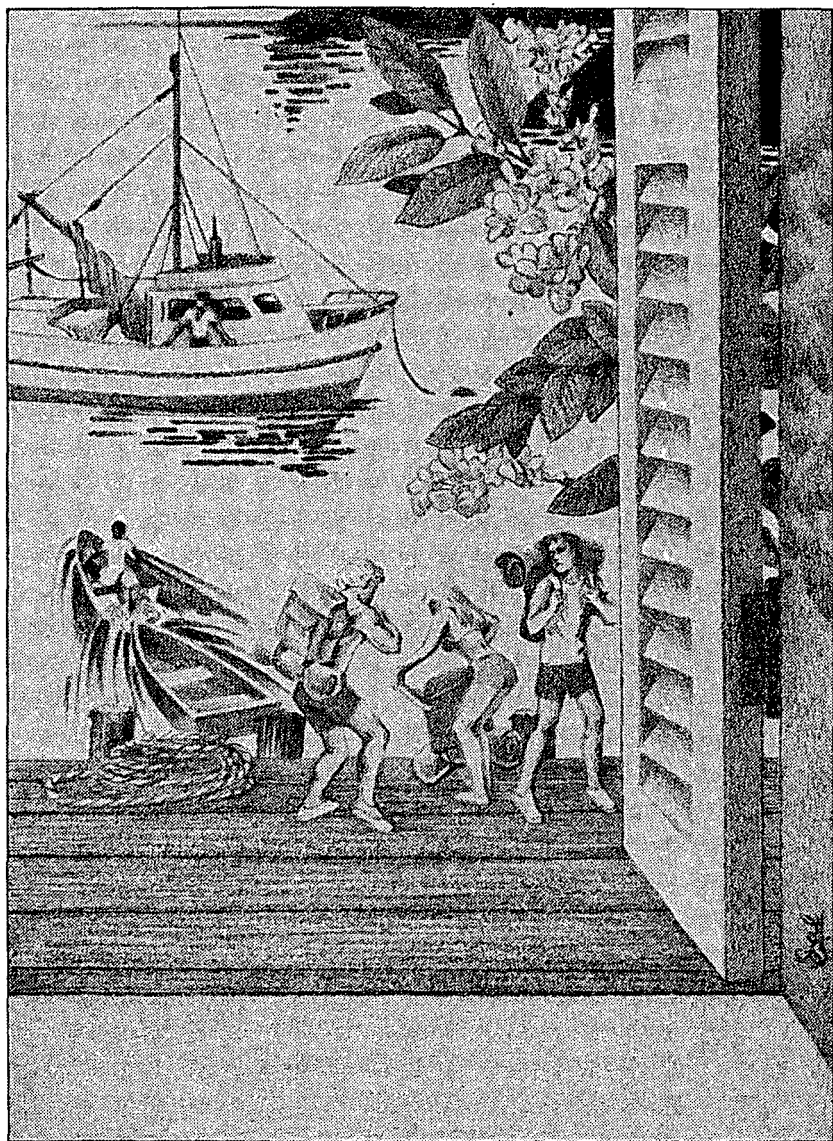
by Gregor Robinson

As it happened, I was the first to set eyes on the stranger. There were actually four of them, but three of the visitors were young and goodlooking, upper middle class by looks and diction, the sort of people we were used to seeing in the islands, so we didn't call them strangers. We called only the older man the stranger. We called him that even after he was dead and we knew his name perfectly well, when he had ceased to be a source of conversation and speculation.

I looked out the window of the bank one morning, through the lemon-light of the frangipani leaves, and saw the boat drop anchor. I heard the splash, the playing out of the chain across the still water. This was May; the yachts from the Carolinas and New England would not be back until fall, and the basin was almost empty. His boat was an old motor-sailor with a high cabin house. The woodwork was battleship grey. The sail was wrapped around the boom in mottled lumps.

As I watched, a ladder was dropped over the side to a wooden tender that bumped along the port side. Three people descended—early twenties, two men and a woman. The woman and one of the men were blond—big, blond, and healthy, the type you see in beer advertisements but who are almost unbelievable in real life. The other person was dark and thin. He looked more like a boy than a man, yet he was the leader; he hurried the others along. They set off in the tender, quickly rowing the short distance to the pier. They were eager to be ashore.

When they reached the pier, the dark man spoke to Ti-Paul, one of the Haitians waiting there for the noon ferry to come in. Cigarettes changed hands, no doubt illegal ones, for drugs were a kind of currency in the islands, and an arrangement was made: the three hoisted their packs onto their shoulders and strolled down the dusty road between the pale casuarinas and the towering royal palms, away from the village. Ti-Paul attached the tender to his outboard and towed it back out to the motor-sailor. He called



THAT WAS MY FIRST SIGHT OF THE STRANGER.

up, then threw the line to the tall figure with wild hair who had come up from below decks.

That was my first sight of the stranger. Six weeks later he lay dead in one of the back rooms of the Majestic Hotel, shot with a .32 caliber bullet, and Constable MacMahon standing behind me in his stout regulation shoes, asking whether I knew of anyone who owned such a weapon.

I knew Tom Hargreaves owned such a gun, bought secondhand in Miami, after a run-in with some drugrunners near More's Island. It was a small Browning automatic, .32 caliber, with a nickel handle—a classic apparently, almost a collector's item. He showed it to me once—several months before that awkward moment with Constable MacMahon in the room at the back of the Majestic Hotel. Hargreaves had been polishing the thing, and the smell of oil had filled the house, forcing Mary Hargreaves, who hated the sea breeze, to throw the windows open wide.

In the Bahamas bankers are known for their discretion: the law provides for it; it is the reason people like the Hargreaveses settle here. Tom Hargreaves was my largest legitimate customer—by which I mean his money did not come from the cocaine trade; if I lost him as a client, they would close the bank and I would have to return to grey Montreal. A delicate situation, I think you will agree. But let me return to the events that led up to that moment.

At twelve thirty the morning the visitors arrived, Ti-Paul came into the bank with the cash receipts from the ferry. He told me that the young people had hitched a ride with the stranger from Green Turtle Cay, half a day's sail away across the Sea of Abaco.

"I think they be here for a while, man," he said as I filled out the deposit book. "The girl, she been real seasick, even just coming over from Turtle Cay. She said she not going on any boat again—not for a long time."

By sunset I knew that they had set up camp down the beach on the Atlantic side, past Annie's Place, at the end of the reef. News travels fast on Pigeon Cay. It was actually Tom Hargreaves himself who told me where they were camped; he had been out in his jeep, and he had seen them turn off the road and take the short trail between the scrubby dunes to the beach. I wondered if he had noticed her then, the blonde girl. Her name was Harriet Jones. She was from Elmira, New York. I learned this for the simplest of reasons: one day she came into the bank to cash a traveler's check.

"You cashing only a hundred bucks?" said the dark boy who

accompanied her, the one I had come to think of as their leader. There was the smell of marijuana about them.

"It's all I have left," the girl said. They looked at one another. The boy watched intently as Winnie counted out the bills. I could see that they were running out of money.

"Any place we can go fishing around here?" the boy asked. "Dive for conch, maybe catch some lobster?"

I told them that the lobster fishery was strictly regulated, that conch was in deeper waters at this time of year. They ought to talk to Mrs. Rainey. Her husband sometimes took visitors out to sea with him, for a small fee. The boy thanked me for the information. He struck me as very intense.

The only other time I saw them was from Tom Hargreaves' deck. I dropped over with some papers for him to sign, investment certificates, and he asked me in for a drink. We stood on the broad wooden deck facing the Atlantic. The young people had moved closer to the village and were now camped in front of the old graveyard just to the south of Hargreaves' house. They had built a lean-to of driftwood, silverwood branches, and palm leaves.

"That's only for their food and pack, a little shelter if it rains," said Hargreaves. "They live and sleep in the open, under the sky." He sounded wistful as he told me this.

One day he had gone to speak to them, he told me, to ask that they be careful of sparks carried by the wind to the dry grass behind the beach. He showed them how to make a banked fire, something he had learned thirty-five years before, in his own youth, at summer camp in Maine. There was a pair of binoculars on the table next to where we sat, U.S. government issue. It was clear that he had made a study of their habits.

Tom Hargreaves was fifty-six years old. He had been retired from the foreign service for three years. He had a sunburned forehead, a nervous wife, a past about which he was vague—he was supposed to have been in U.S. intelligence. He was a big man, and he was still handsome, though you seldom noticed it because his restlessness was a distraction.

When Mary went into the house to see about the dinner, he handed me the binoculars. He said, "Take a look if you like." But I could see the young people from where we were even without the binoculars. It was a warm night. They were body surfing. They were nude.

"Can't they see us from down there?" I said. Tom Hargreaves

was wearing a large straw hat to protect his scaly forehead from the sun. It was a hat he often wore, and I knew it would be visible from much farther down the beach than their campfire.

"Sun's behind us now, we're in the shadows," he said. He had become shifty-eyed. He avoided my gaze. I felt rather furtive myself.

The woman, Harriet Jones, strode from the water. She reached up and ran her hands along the sides of her head, squeezing the sea water from her long hair. She was looking towards the sunset, and I thought she must have noticed Tom and me watching as she entered the lean-to. The boys wrapped towels around themselves and began the business of setting the fire.

There was a bustling behind us, the clink of ice, Tom Hargreaves coughing. Mary had returned. Hargreaves harrumphed, began to talk. He said he thought they might be drug couriers—terrible people, ruining the place, ought to get the Defence Force after them. The truth was that we often saw people like these traveling through the islands, especially in the summer. They came down for weeks, sometimes months on end. They slept on the beaches and spent their days lolling beneath the palms. Some stayed until winter and found jobs in the restaurants and resort hotels. I thought Tom was being overly romantic in assigning them the role of drug couriers. Or perhaps he was being devious. Mary said nothing.

I expected the stranger to drop in at the bank, too—most visitors do, if not for money then at least to make themselves known, for government is scarce in the islands and the bank often serves as a kind of unofficial consulate—but he never came. Still, because of my vantage point overlooking the harbor, I saw more of him than anybody else. I saw him working on the deck of his boat, rowing ashore to buy his simple needs in the village (frozen bread, long-life milk, butter, instant coffee, a bag of sugar: there are no secrets in the village), walking along the broad sidewalk that was the Queen's Highway with his loping stride, or strolling along the edge of the surf. He seemed to find the beach irresistible. That was something I could understand, from when I had first arrived on Pigeon Cay a year before. Day after day you found yourself walking along that infinite white curve, the waves breaking and foaming, the rush of the wind through the sea grapes, the sun and the salt breeze warm on your skin. There was an almost hypnotic allure.

For the stranger it seemed to be more than that. It was as though

he was looking for something. As we found out later, he was looking for the girl.

A few mornings after he arrived, I threw open the shutters and saw that his boat was gone. He had left these waters, probably for Eleuthera and the southern Caribbean, I thought. But the next morning the boat was back at the mooring. Sometimes the stranger was back and gone the same day. There was one other peculiar thing: the stranger lived on that boat, yet he had taken the room at the Majestic, one of the cheap ones at the back.

"Does he use it much?" Hargreaves asked Madame Grumbacher. This was perhaps ten days after the stranger had arrived. I was buying Hargreaves lunch at the Terrace Bar of the Majestic. He had been among my first and was still among my biggest private customers. His wife was old money, and Tom owned rental properties throughout the Caribbean. I treated people like the Hargreaveses well.

"You should know better than to ask me that," said Madame Grumbacher, her voice booming. She had been in the islands for twenty years, yet she still spoke with a strong German accent. "We innkeepers must be discreet—just like bankers." She grinned and winked.

Mary Hargreaves, a look of disapproval on her face, sat across the table from us, waiting. At the Yacht Club, it was well known that she thought Tom drank too much. Mary dabbed at her forehead with a pink handkerchief. Her movements were jerky, like a little bird's.

Baggy white pants, no shirt, no shoes. He would have been about forty. He had fine features. Despite the unkempt hair, the shadow of his unshaven face, and the weathered skin, he was goodlooking; you could see that even in death. I was feeling rather queasy. It was not something they covered at the London School of Economics, how to view dead bodies. I had been sent for because by then it was well known that I was the village authority on the stranger.

The room was filled with rancid air from the kitchen exhaust vents below the window. "That him?" said Constable MacMahon. He was the island's only policeman. He was very large. Together with Dr. Cutter and the dead stranger, we filled the room.

"It's him," I said.

He had been shot no more than five hours before, according to Dr. Cutter, around noon, when the village was at its busiest and

the freight boat was unloading and the big fans from the hotel kitchens were spinning full blast. No one had heard a thing. His name was Ainsley; MacMahon determined this by going through the man's wallet. There was some U.S. and Bahamian currency in the top drawer of the dresser, about five hundred U.S. altogether. The cash, the boat that was in and out of the harbor, this room which might serve as a business venue for nervous customers: it appeared as though the stranger was in the drug trade.

"Right," said Constable MacMahon, "now I search the boat."

He was all business; things were proceeding as though we had a drug shooting on our hands, rare on Pigeon Cay but not so uncommon on some of the other islands. For Constable MacMahon, it would be a solution. For me there was the matter of the gun.

Mary Hargreaves did not like unannounced visits. Even though I had my briefcase and the pretext of business, she was reluctant to ask me in. She was more damp-eyed and fluttery than usual. When she finally opened the door to let me pass, I saw why. The house had been ransacked. Two of the large front windows had been smashed. Furniture was overturned, books pulled from the shelves, food from the pantry and refrigerator strewn across the stone floors and grey carpets. The house smelled of liquor; bottles had been smashed against the walls.

Tom Hargreaves had been fishing; Mary had left early to do the weekly shopping across the channel. They had returned to find this.

"Who do you think it was?" I asked.

I thought Mary was about to answer when Hargreaves came from behind and interrupted. "No idea," he said.

"Did they take anything?"

"Not that I can see," he said. He was brusque. I thought perhaps there was something he wasn't telling me. When Mary left the room, I asked again, "Is anything missing?"

He stared at me in a kind of trance but said nothing. I told him that the stranger was dead in his room in the Majestic Hotel. Shot with a .32 caliber bullet. "You must tell the police about this," I said, sweeping my hand across the debris of the living room.

"Why?" said Hargreaves.

"Because otherwise they will think you killed the stranger."

"Constable MacMahon does not know that I own a .32 caliber pistol. Unless you told him. So no one will think anything."

I was a banker and discreet by nature. It was unlikely that Hargreaves was a murderer. But how can you ever be sure?

When I left the house, Hargreaves walked me up the path: he wanted a word in private, away from Mary. He stopped by the gate and took my elbow.

"The girl, you know, on the beach, I understand she cashed some sort of traveler's check?" I was surprised he knew about that. I nodded. Hargreaves removed his straw hat, scratched his forehead. "You know her name then, where she is from and so on?" I nodded again.

Tom said, "David; you and I are friends. I am your customer. I would appreciate it if you didn't mention any of those details—about the girl, I mean—to Constable MacMahon, should he ask."

"Speak of the devil," I said, looking over Hargreaves' shoulder. Constable MacMahon came clapping along the sidewalk. Hargreaves' grip on my elbow tightened, but Constable MacMahon had not come to see him. He was on his way to the beach, to the campsite of the young people. I offered to accompany him.

It seemed that the stranger was indeed a dealer, small time—"I found a few packets of the stuff on the boat, all neatly done up in plastic the way they do for the tourists," Constable MacMahon told me—but the theory of the room at the Majestic as a place for drug transactions was falling apart. No one had visited the stranger there (Madame Grumbacher confirmed this), and there were no drugs in the room. All the same, MacMahon was determined to stick to the drug business; it got him off the hook.

We reached the end of the Queen's Highway and turned left towards the beach and the sound of the surf. As we walked through the old cemetery to the beach, I noticed a solitary figure watching us from Hargreaves' deck. Tom or Mary? I couldn't say.

They must have left in a hurry, for the fire pit was still warm. While MacMahon sifted through the ashes, I strolled up the bank behind the campsite. Here beneath the brambles and sea grapes I spotted Hargreaves' binoculars, smashed and encrusted with white salt blotches of sea water. They must have thrown them up here from the beach.

"Find anything?" said Constable MacMahon.

"No," I said, for I had made my decision to protect Hargreaves.

But Constable MacMahon discovered that Hargreaves had

owned a .32 without my help, and he learned about the break-in, too. The gun itself was never found—not surprising with the Atlantic Ocean and the Sea of Abaco all around us. As for the young people, the very day the body was found Ti-Paul ferried them across the channel, where they had taken the plane to Fort Lauderdale. Their money problems had apparently been resolved.

“They stole the gun from Mr. Hargreaves, you see,” said Constable MacMahon. We were sitting at the bar of the Majestic; Constable MacMahon was telling how he had solved the mystery. “I don’t think he had in mind to use it at first. They were up there to teach Mr. Hargreaves a little lesson.” It was something everyone in the village knew by now, that Hargreaves had been watching the girl through his binoculars. He kept watching her even after the two boys had warned him, Constable MacMahon told us, until finally they came and ransacked the place. They took the binoculars (and destroyed them, as I had discovered that day on the beach). And they took the gun.

“How did you know all this—that Hargreaves had a gun, that these people stole it?” asked Burnett.

“Ah, now there is something I cannot tell you, sir. We must protect our sources.” Constable MacMahon took a noisy gulp of his beer. He continued.

“As for the murder, it was the same old story, I believe you would call it. The eternal triangle. The boy—the dark one—he must have seen them together, on the beach perhaps, probably that morning. The Haitians in the bush—some of them had seen her with an older fellow several times, they said. The boy had Mr. Hargreaves’ gun to hand—I say he killed the stranger because he and the girl were having it off.”

Having it off, that was Constable MacMahon’s term. He had talked to Ti-Paul and to others in the islands where the stranger’s boat had been, and it was true: the man had been pursuing the girl. He was a smalltime drug dealer all right, but that had nothing to do with his return visits to Pigeon Cay.

“The girl was prone to seasickness,” MacMahon told us. “She had vowed to stay off boats. That’s why the stranger took the room, a place for them to go to, like.”

“Have another beer, constable,” said Burnett.

“Thank you, sir, I believe I will,” said Constable MacMahon. “As for poor Mr. Hargreaves, he was right. She *was* mad at him, was Mary—his watching the girl, getting them involved in all this. I

hear she is leaving him. Leastways for awhile."

We stared at him in silence. This was a surprise. But the biggest surprise for me came a few days later. Mary Hargreaves came into the bank. She wanted to look after some loose ends, she said, for she was leaving the island—for good. There would no longer be a joint account. The Hargreaveses were having more of a parting than we had imagined.

Mary went carefully over the records. Something caught her eye—a couple of recent transactions, rather large checks made out to cash.

"Ah, you see!" she said. She was bright-eyed. She was almost shouting. I had never seen her like this. "He even gave her money, the bastard!"

Then I knew who had tipped MacMahon off about the gun. Hargreaves must have thought until the end that she hadn't known. But wives always know. The dark boy had shot the wrong man. It was not the stranger who had been seeing the girl. It was old Tom Hargreaves.

Important Notice to Subscribers: All subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, Iowa 51591. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Send us your current mailing label with new address.

The Ethical Assassination

by Frank Sisk

T*he Knights of Pythias invite you to relax.*

This cordial message in white script ran across the green backs of the several wrought-iron benches anchored to the concrete walk that skirted the small urban park. At the moment, time and clime were hardly propitious to acceptance of the fraternal offer. A bleak dawn, lowering with a sleety mist, had already turned yesterday's snow into a dingy slush. Yet one of the benches had a guest, and he appeared to be relaxed utterly. Sitting in the slumped position of one who has dozed off, the man's hatless head of thick peppery hair sagged sidewise on his left shoulder. The drizzle, freezing as a crust on his coat collar, failed to disturb him. Nor was he bothered by the semicircle of sound—shuffling feet and muttering voices—that grew steadily around him in number and volume. Even the icy voice of Captain Thomas McFate left him totally unmoved.

McFate said, "All right. Cover the poor devil up."

A police sergeant, who had

already fetched a spare raincoat from the nearby cruiser, draped it like a stiff yellow shroud over the dead man's head and forefront.

McFate next said, "Get rid of these damned gawks."

Behind him a patrolman turned to face the crowd that had been gathering for the past fifteen minutes and gradually inching closer. "Okay, folks. Move along now. That's it. Right on home or wherever you're going or you'll all catch cold and die."

"A high-powered rifle job if I ever saw one," McFate was saying to the sergeant. "At long range, too." Half turning, he aimed his sallow, hollow-cheeked face across the street. "From somewhere in that hotel. Sixth or seventh floor."

"Could be, sir. I'm no coroner but—"

"I'll take odds, Hanson. As soon as Bergeron gets back here with this Damroth, I want you and a couple of men to go through that trap with a fine-toothed comb."

Just then a second police cruiser ranged along the curb,

sending a sheet of dirty water among the reluctantly dispersing onlookers, and parked behind the first. A lieutenant, surprisingly youthful, leaped out and opened the rear door to assist an elderly man who obviously didn't desire assistance. He waved the young lieutenant aside and emerged by himself. Erect, he was a few inches over six feet and looked much taller because of his nearly excruciating thinness. His face was thin, too, and long to the point of fragility, but the wide mouth was strong and the dark eyes were alive with intelligence and a glint of humor.

McFate approached him, holding out his right hand. "Sorry to get you up so early, doctor."

"Just call me mister," said the newcomer. "All my doctorates are honorary. Useful on the Foundation letterhead but preposterous in normal human intercourse. Now, what's the crisis?"

"Bergeron told you nothing?"

"The lieutenant was most discreet."

McFate nodded grimly. "He was following orders, Dr. Damroth."

"To the letter. And may I remind you again that I prefer to be addressed as mister."

"Pardon me. I'm Tom McFate."

"I know. I've lived in this city for twenty of my seventy years, sir, and in the course of that time I have familiarized myself through the newspapers with your name, your face, and your exploits. Whenever a journalistic account of the day's news included the name of Captain Thomas McFate, there also was a crisis involving life or death. Generally death, and generally death due to homicide. That is the reason I have already asked you what crisis concerns you now. And more to the point, why does it concern me at this ungodly hour of such an inclement day?"

McFate's cheeks grew perceptibly more hollow, as if he were suppressing the cold cackle that sometimes served him for laughter. "Well, Mr. Damroth, you're right about homicide. We got a clean one."

"Clean is not, I suppose, an incongruity."

"A thirty-caliber slug is my guess. Through the heart. Death instantaneous."

"Clean indeed," said Mr. Damroth with a thin smile. From a silver case he took a honey-colored cigarillo. "Am I acquainted with the victim?"

"We don't know. But he seemed to be acquainted with you."

"Who is he? Or who *was* he?"

"We don't know that yet ei-

ther." McFate held a match for Mr. Damroth's cigarillo. "Nothing on him but an empty wallet with one of those cards, 'Notify in case of accident.'"

Mr. Damroth bent toward the flame. "I can see my name on it."

"That's right, sir," said McFate. "Would you like to take a look at him for I.D.?"

"Naturally."

"This way then, doc—pardon me. Force of habit."

Smiling, the old man accompanied McFate to the bench and watched with clinical intentness as the upper part of the raincoat was drawn back from the face. The clinical intentness remained but now was joined by the light of recognition. "You know him?" asked McFate.

"Very well, yes."

"Who is he?"

But Mr. Damroth was posing questions to himself and to the cigarillo. "To go like this. A month or so before his time. Incredible. Poor Ketch. I wonder why?"

"That his name? Ketch?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, that's his name. Harlan Ketch. Dr. Harlan Ketch. A superb mathematician." He turned to look sternly at McFate. "In this case, the doctorate was *not* honorary."

Hanson, the sergeant, said,

"I knew he wasn't no hood. Tell by his hands."

McFate said to Hanson, "Tell me something I want to hear when you come back from that hotel across the street." Then to Mr. Damroth: "Was he associated with the Foundation?"

"For the past ten years."

"You said something about a month before his time. Or did I hear wrong?"

"You heard correctly," said the old man, still musing with his own thoughts. "The unfortunate man was dying of cancer. He would have been dead within a month. Two months at the most."

"When did you see him last, Mr. Damroth?"

"Just yesterday afternoon. At tea we had our usual discussion, jocular on my part but quite serious on his, about his mathematical approach to ethics."

"A little out of my line." McFate drew a crumpled handkerchief from the pocket of his yellow slicker. "Did he have a cold at the time?"

"A curious question, McFate." The old man looked outward now with a searching interest. "The answer is no. In fact, he had been immune to the common cold for the past six months."

"Some new drug at the Foundation?"

"One of the oldest drugs in the world, McFate. Morphine. It not only kills pain but in many cases it appears to kill the cold virus."

"Be damned," said McFate. "Well, that proves something, sir."

He shook open the handkerchief and held it up. Near the center was a ragged hole the size of a dime. "We found this in his lap. Hanson thought Ketch had been shot while getting ready to blow his nose. I thought different. I guess I was right."

Mr. Damroth appreciatively regarded the captain. "What a bizarre implication! The handkerchief was an effective target."

"Held over his heart. White threads in the black fabric of his coat where the bullet entered. A man in a room in that hotel over there needed that kind of a target at dawn. With a scope on a rifle he could guarantee a clean job."

"Clean, again. I see the meaning now. But why should Dr. Ketch have himself assassinated when he was so near death anyway? Have you considered that?"

"I'm considering it, sir. Intolerable pain maybe."

"I think not. The morphine kept him tolerably comfortable. He assured me of this himself.

He tired easily. He ate little. He was losing considerable weight. But, those were the only symptoms evident to me or his other colleagues, and we saw him daily."

"Then it must have been something else. Insurance. Double indemnity for accidental death."

Mr. Damroth slowly rotated the cigarillo between his lips and nodded. "Yes, that might be it. It sounds more in character."

"Then he had insurance of that sort?"

"His financial arrangements were never a topic of discussion between us. I don't know."

"Was he married?"

"Yes. He remarried a few years ago. His first wife died shortly after he joined the Foundation. I hardly knew her. I hardly know his present wife—his widow, rather—but I deduced overtly that the union was not a huge success."

Thirty minutes later, A.B.C. Damroth, president of the Tilary Foundation, and Thomas McFate, chief of the Homicide Division, debouched from a cruiser and made their way along a wet walk to the entrance of a modest apartment building. It required five well-spaced but prolonged pressings of a button under a mailbox bearing Ketch's name to gain a

response. And not a very civil one at that, until Mr. Damroth identified himself. Then the tone of sleepy annoyance left Mrs. Ketch's somewhat hoarse voice to be replaced by gushing surprise and apology. The buzzer sounded to admit the oddly assorted pair, and they moved without a word down a long, echoing hallway to a brownish door marked B-22. At their knock it was opened by an opulently endowed woman in her early thirties who was still folding a fluffy negligee around herself while at the same time trying to do something with her orange-colored hair. As, moving backward, she ushered them into the foyer and thence into the living room, she again expressed surprise, apology, and even a feeling of honor in having the famous Dr. Damroth in her presence.

When the torrent of feminine exclamations and non sequiturs was over, Mr. Damroth said softly, "I'm afraid we have some bad news about Harlan."

Mrs. Ketch didn't quite get the gist. "I'm afraid he's not here."

McFate said, "We know that." Then stiffly, "He's dead."

Mrs. Ketch looked momentarily baffled, but she didn't sit down. "Dead," she said, an expression just short of delight flitting across her face. "Well,

that's, that's, that's—" her eyes widened now in complete comprehension. "That was to be expected." She sat down in a chair.

McFate's jaundiced eyes studied her sternly. "You expected him to die today?"

"Not today necessarily." Then the woman reacted to McFate's icy stare. "Just who is this man, Dr. Damroth?"

The old gentleman performed the introduction and, while Mrs. Ketch was repeating the word "police" to herself, he added to McFate, "With your permission, may I ask her a few questions?"

"Take it. Sure."

"I assume you were aware that Harlan was mortally ill."

Mrs. Ketch, mollified by this approach, said, "Yeah, I knew. Cancer. I didn't believe it at first. But then he had me talk to his doctor. It was incurable, just a matter of time."

"When did he tell you about it, my dear?" said Mr. Damroth with a silkiness that caused McFate to suck in his cheeks.

"A couple of weeks ago."

"I see. And why didn't you believe him at first?"

"Because of all his rigamarole about the insurance policies," said Mrs. Ketch. "Meek as a lamb, but sly as a fox when it suited him."

McFate cleared his throat;

Damroth prevailed, however, by saying, "Exactly how did a discussion of insurance make you doubt that your husband was a dying man?"

"It was so out of character," replied Mrs. Ketch. "Or so *in* character. His *ethical self*, as he called it. Making me the sole beneficiary of his policy and cutting his darling daughter out."

"And he actually did that?" Even the old man's life-riven face betrayed another wrinkle: surprise.

"Yes, he did," said Mrs. Ketch a bit defiantly. "And why shouldn't he? After all, his daughter has a husband now, another poor bookworm like Harlan. But what do I have?"

"Do you recall the face amount of the policy?" asked Damroth.

"Twenty-five thousand."

"Then that's what you have, Mrs. Ketch."

Her face softened with satisfaction. "Why, that's right. So I do."

McFate interposed. "Maybe more, with a double indemnity clause."

"No, he didn't have that in his policy, and they wouldn't let him add it. But they put it in mine because I was so much younger." She was proud of this.

"In yours?" Damroth took over again. "Then you now

have an insurance policy, Mrs. Ketch?"

"Why, sure. For the same amount but *with* that indemnity thing. That was the deal. That's what made me suspicious when he first brought it up."

"And who, may I ask, is the beneficiary of your policy?"

"Who but his precious daughter? But I can always change that now. And don't bet I won't."

Damroth smiled oddly. "I see. You agreed to take out a policy on yourself, naming Harlan's daughter sole beneficiary, providing he made you sole beneficiary of his existing policy. Is that right?"

"Yes, but I'm no dummy. That ethics stuff he liked to spout—acting for the greatest good—I didn't swallow that one little bit. Before I signed on the dotted line, I made him take me to his doctor. He had cancer all right, no doubt of it."

Damroth remained thoughtfully silent, but McFate didn't. "It wasn't cancer that killed him," he said.

"No? Then what did?"

"A rifle bullet."

"You mean he was shot?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Who by?" Mrs. Ketch was obviously intrigued.

"We don't know yet. Any ideas?"

"Who, me? No. But what a funny coincidence! Just last night—spooky, very spooky." Her frown was more perplexed than fearful.

Damroth interposed quietly, "What is the coincidence, my dear lady?"

"Well, he gave me this envelope that was written on the front of it not to be opened until after his death. Sealed with wax and all. And inside was this key and a note saying—" She stopped, lips pursed.

"May we see the note?" asked Damroth.

"Of course not," snapped Mrs. Ketch. "Things like that are private between a man and his wife."

"Indeed, yes," the old man said, again with that odd smile.

Back in the cruiser five minutes later, McFate said to Damroth, "This is the first time ethics ever came into a case with me. Could you educate me as we drive along?"

The old man chuckled. "On that subject, I'm not too well educated myself, but perhaps I can communicate the gist of Ketch's theory. He was a mathematician, not a philosopher. But since mathematics is a logical science, the pure practitioner invariably begins to think that equations can be devised for the chief aspects of philosophy, which are said to

be logic, aesthetics, and ethics. Descartes once wrote, '*Omnia apud me mathematica fiunt*'—with me everything turns into mathematics. It was the same with Harlan Ketch."

McFate said, "I hear you but that's all."

"You were probably exposed to algebra once. You remember the simple equation $a + b = c$. Well, Ketch used equations like that, though much more complex, to determine a course of action when he was faced by a problem. In the simple algebraic example, a might represent two apples and b might represent three apples. Thus, when you saw the symbol c , you knew it meant five apples. If squared, it became twenty-five apples. Now in Ketch's immediate history, he may have used c , let's say, for cancer and perhaps d for death, t for the time remaining, m for money, h for his daughter's welfare—"

"Mr. Damroth, I'm lost. Why h for his daughter's welfare instead of d or w ?"

"Well, not d because we assigned that to death. Possibly w , though. I picked h , since her name is Honora."

"She's married?"

"Yes, to a grammar school teacher named Speares whom I've met possibly twice. Amiable lad. They're both quite young."

"And not much liked by the widow."

"Evidently. In fact, I believe it was this antagonism, especially between the—ah—widow and Honora that precipitated the wedding. The young people planned to wait until Bill—that's Speares's first name—took his master's degree. But the situation in the Ketch household grew intolerable. Finally, but reluctantly, Harlan gave his consent. His only child, you know, and she wasn't more than eighteen at the time. Still, unlike so many young-love matches, this one has turned out well. I gather that Harlan helped them out with a little money from time to time. Very little, however, for Mrs. Ketch apparently was voracious." The old man produced another cigarillo. "Enough of this gossip, McFate. Let's return to your education."

"Not now, sir, thank you." The cruiser was pulling to the curb in the city's financial district. "I've got to learn something here first."

"Where in the world are we?"

"At the headquarters of an insurance company. Want to come in?"

"I must if my own education is to be complete."

After passing through a receptionist and several white collar personnel of progres-

sively higher rank, Damroth and McFate finally gained access to a glass enclosure occupied by an assistant vice-president named Melrose. After listening to the police request, he spoke on an intercom. A few minutes later a pretty girl placed two perforated cards on his desk and, with a polite smile, withdrew. Melrose exchanged the glasses he was wearing for a pair from his pocket and examined each card quickly.

"Ketch, Mrs. Harlan B. parentheses Melanie," he said, "is insured for twenty-five thousand dollars. A clause doubles this sum in case of accidental death, except when such death occurs in a nonscheduled aircraft flight. The premium was paid in advance two weeks ago for a full year.

"Ketch, Mr. Harlan B., for Broadbent, was insured by us in the same amount, but without the so-called double indemnity clause, until four days ago. At that time, he terminated the policy and was paid its accumulated cash value of seven thousand three hundred and forty dollars and twenty-six cents. By check. The check was honored the next day by the Pioneer Bank and Trust." Melrose dropped the cards and removed his glasses. "Does that answer your questions, gentlemen?"

"All but two," said McFate. "Who is the beneficiary on Mrs. Ketch's policy?"

Melrose picked up a card, replacing glasses. "Speares, Mrs. William S. parentheses Honora."

"And on the other policy?"

"Speares, Mrs.—no, that had been changed. At the time of termination, the sole beneficiary was Ketch, Mrs. Harlan B."

Again outside the building, Damroth said, "McFate, I begin to discern the shadow on an equation involving logic and ethics."

"Then stick close."

"I also believe I know where we'll go next. The Pioneer Bank and Trust."

"I'll say one thing, sir. If I learned algebra as fast as you pick up police procedure, I'd be a deputy commissioner tomorrow."

They arrived at the bank a few minutes before ten o'clock and approached a starchy blue-haired lady sitting nearest the door behind a mahogany railing. The nameplate on the desk identified her as second assistant treasurer. After a keen glance at Damroth's cigarillo and McFate's badge, she murmured something about a Mr. Kessler and left to go to another desk, a larger desk three rows back. When she returned,

she pointed to it, saying Mr. Kessler would see them. This gentleman, brisk and prematurely bald, to judge from his youngish unlined face, proved to be the assistant treasurer, and he got down to the business at hand immediately.

"Dr. Harlan Ketch cashed a check here in the amount mentioned just four days ago," said Kessler, consulting memoranda and several files that seemed to be miraculously at his fingertips. "He did not deposit any of the cash. In fact, he closed out his savings account of two hundred and three dollars and eighty-three cents."

"And walked out with all that cash?" asked McFate.

"Not all of it. Five thousand he took in twenty-dollar bills. We provided the heavy manila envelope. The approximate remainder was converted into a treasurer's check in the amount of twenty-five hundred dollars. I handled the transaction personally, and I particularly remember it because of his insistence on the date."

"Who was named on the check?" asked McFate.

"George Tinker. It seems Dr. Ketch hoped to consummate a business deal with Mr. Tinker and wanted the check to bind it."

Damroth spoke around the cigarillo. "You referred to the

date. I presume that means the date of the check."

"Oh, yes." Kessler consulted another document. "He was quite insistent that the check be dated ahead to—yes—it did not become negotiable until today."

"I wonder," said Damroth, that odd smile on his old face, "if that check has already been cashed this morning, Mr. Kessler."

"The banks have only been open an hour, sir. But—well, let me see. With a treasurer's ticket for that sum we usually get prompt reports." He lifted a phone, spoke, waited, spoke again with a frown of faint surprise, and hung up. "Dr. Ketch and Mr. Tinker are early birds, gentlemen. Mr. Tinker cashed the check at nine fifteen with the Merchant Savings. We must assume the business deal was favorably concluded." He smiled with commercial pleasure.

"Irrevocably concluded, at least," said Damroth, smiling oddly.

An hour later Captain Thomas McFate's cramped office was the scene of a report, a coffee break, and an analytical conversation. The report came from the youthful lieutenant named Bergeron on the results of a preliminary investigation he had conducted in the hotel

across the street from the Knights of Pythias bench. Room 727 had been rented the previous afternoon to one W. Collins who had checked out this morning shortly after day-break.

Nobody could recall what W. Collins looked like because he checked in at the latter part of the afternoon, when, as usual, a lot of people were checking in. And he checked out during the last few minutes of the night clerk's shift when the night clerk was half asleep and trying to keep his eyes open just long enough to finish the essential closeout paperwork.

"Mr. Collins is a pro," said McFate after Bergeron left.

"Mr. Collins is also Mr. Tinker," said Damroth.

"And a couple of other guys, too."

A sergeant brought in two containers of coffee and four sugared crullers. The practical man and the academic man, looking out the grimy window at the leaden day, sipped and chewed for a few minutes in silence. Then the practical man said, "How would a gent like Dr. Ketch ever find a way to meet a hood like this Tinker?"

The academic man said, "That thought has occurred to me, too. A year ago Harlan's interest in the inevitable logic of numbers as they appear in

games of chance turned him toward the gambling tables. Purely experimental, I assure you. The sums wagered were small, and the profits small, too. But he definitely had worked out some sort of system, and for a few months used the gambling dives as a laboratory. The system was not perfected, however, as I recall. He told me once that the house limit in most places prevented numbers from progressing to a real conclusion."

"This Ketch was quite a thinker."

"The treasurer's check was typical," said Damroth.

"Tell me about it."

"As it appears to me, the key to the transaction between Ketch and Tinker was the payment. Each had to be sure that the other didn't default on his part of the deal. Obviously, nobody could pay Tinker for assassinating Ketch at his own request, except Ketch himself. And since this type of agreement isn't exactly adjudicable, Ketch could not afford to pay in advance. Men like Tinker, I imagine, might not honor the contract. Hence, Ketch devised a way to pay Tinker only after the service was satisfactorily rendered. That accounts for the time—before the banks opened today. And the predated treasurer's check."

"If Ketch was still alive when the banks opened, he would have stopped payment on the check. That it?"

"Correct. In the business world this is called incentive. Ketch gave Tinker a strong incentive to kill him this morning before the banks opened."

McFate swallowed more coffee and then suddenly sat erect. "Incentive, that's the word. He also must have given this Tinker a strong incentive to kill Mrs. Ketch."

"Correct again." The old man wiped crumbs from his chin. "You're getting a knack for these ethical equations, McFate."

"A good gamble. Seventy-five hundred bucks against fifty thousand."

"With his daughter as sole heir. A nice equation. A slightly postdated check, a slightly postdated death, plus an ethical assassination equals an estate for the deserving daughter minus any possible litigation from the undeserving wife."

"All right, sir," said McFate impatiently. "But now that the sitting duck is dead, how can he pay off Tinker for killing Mrs. Ketch?"

"Tinker will collect from Mrs. Ketch herself," Damroth replied.

"Five thousand bucks in a

manila envelope. She doesn't look the type. He'd have to kill her for it."

"And he will. That's his business, isn't it?"

McFate was now on his feet. "I'm beginning to get it, yeah. The key he gave her last night. And that note."

"In an envelope not to be opened until after his death. He judged her well, didn't he? Timed it well, too. When she broke the wax seal last night and read the note, it was probably too late to use the key. But she would have used it this morning whether Ketch was dead or not. Greed and curiosity. She's probably using it at this very minute."

"You think it's a key to a safety deposit box?"

"Definitely not. If I know my Dr. Harlan Ketch—and I'm growing to know him better today—he placed that manila envelope in a baggage locker at some out-of-the-way depot or bus station, a place that would be fairly deserted after the morning commuters left. A place, in short, where Mr. Tinker could work unmolested."

McFate reached for the phone and issued a command to the switchboard. To Damroth he said, "Maybe I can get her at home before she leaves."

Damroth smiled. "I'd wager it's too late."

It was. Nobody answered.

Therefore, McFate took the next practical police step. With a coded municipal map spread out on his desk and the phone still in hand, he began assigning men to every location within the city limits that had public baggage lockers, adding a personal description of Mrs. Ketch.

"She's one of these orange-haired dames about thirty-five," he was saying for the sixth time when he stopped abruptly to listen, his face cold and expressionless. Then he hung up and swiveled his chair around to face Damroth. "He got her. With a knife. They just found the body of an orange-haired dame in an alley near Brixon bus terminal. That's the end of the line."

Damroth said nothing for a moment. Taking another cigarillo from his case, he placed it thoughtfully between his yellow teeth. "Well, sir," he finally said, "the ethical question that now comes to my mind is this: does crime sometimes pay? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Sometimes," answered McFate. "Why?"

"I'm trying to put myself in Ketch's frame of mind when he was working out his equation. He must have considered the fact that the insurance company would try to invali-

date the policy on the basis of collusion."

"That's automatic, under these circumstances," said McFate. "But, of course, they've got to prove it."

"It takes at least two to collude, doesn't it?"

"That's what the lawyers say."

"Then all that has to be done is find Mr. Tinker."

"That's all."

"To humor an old man, would you tell me candidly what your chances are?"

"Off the record, yeah. About one in a hundred. Hell, one in a thousand."

Damroth nodded as if this confirmed a tentatively held opinion. Then, lighting the cigarillo, he said, "You know, McFate, I'm just learning to appreciate that mathematics is a terrifying science."

(continued from page 4)

in New Mexico after an earlier career as head of "three automobile dealerships and owner of a small real estate company."

Douglas D. Armstrong, author of "The Slip," is a journalist and movie critic from Milwaukee who travels "frequently as a film critic to festivals and premieres, as well as to visit movie sets." Another story by Mr. Armstrong will be coming up in our July issue.

Although "Worthsayer" is Stanley Schmidt's first mystery story, he is an accomplished writer of science fiction, having

published some thirty short stories in a variety of magazines as well as four novels (the most recent is *Tweedlioop*, Tor, 1986) and a good bit of nonfiction. Stan is a former physics professor, editor of our sister magazine *Analog*, a musician who plays first trumpet with the Danbury Symphony Orchestra, a photographer whose work is on permanent exhibit in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, a pilot, an inveterate traveler and back-packer, and a linguist whose dozen languages include Catalan, Polish, and Swahili. (Whew.)

Leo

by Ron Abell

In the first place I wasn't on an interstate, in the second place I didn't have much of an idea where I was to begin with, and in the third place I didn't even have a car in the first place. I was hitchhiking. All in all, not one of my better days. Or months. I'd just spent thirty days in alimony jail in Colorado, thanks to a vindictive ex-wife and a hang-'em-high judge. He'd actually sentenced me to six months, which I thought was excessive, but prison space being at a premium these days, I got out in one. Big deal. I was still broke and trying to get to San Diego, where I had the promise of a job in a restaurant. They said I'd be head chef if things worked out, but in the meantime they were going to start me at a salary they could get away with paying in a place where the work force *du jour* was mostly illegal immigrants. But that's the way it was. Like I'd told the judge in Colorado, things were tough all over.

So there I was that morning, just me and my backpack on the side of the road in the mid-

dle of Nowhere, Arizona. I'd shivered my way through a cold night before up in the mountains, and when I finally got down to a lower altitude, a drunk in a rickety flatbed picked me up outside of Cortez. He muttered nonstop about his dog, or his wife who hated his dog, or his dog who hated his wife, I couldn't tell which, and after one too many four-wheel drifts that shaved highway death by a whisker, I told him I wanted out.

Which left me in no-where'sville, all by myself in the flatlands looking at a long stretch of empty two-lane blacktop. By then the sun was up and the day was turning into a scorcher. My windbreaker, which hadn't been much of an asset the night before when I'd needed it, was turning into a downright liability now that I didn't. I peeled it off, stuffed it in my backpack, and stood there waiting for traffic so I could stick my thumb out.

Which took a while. I was soaking with sweat and halfway to a heat stroke by the

time a car finally stopped. It was a black Lincoln with two men in it, the driver being a hard-looking guy who rolled his window down and asked, "Can you drive?"

"Like Burt Reynolds," I said.

He jerked his chin. "Get in."

He climbed over the front seat and plopped himself down in back. It struck me as a rough way to treat the upholstery, but it wasn't any of my business so I just got in behind the steering wheel. The second man, who was sitting on the passenger side in front, said, "Man, you're big enough to eat hay."

I let it go. I wasn't exactly in love with the company I'd found but what the hell, a ride was a ride. I put my backpack in the well at the passenger's feet, slid the gearshift into Drive, and pulled onto the highway.

"Wake me in Flagstaff," the guy in back said. Meanwhile the guy in front picked up my backpack and squeezed it, feeling to see what was inside. It annoyed me, but it didn't seem worth making an issue over, and anyway he quit in a minute. He dropped the pack at his feet, leaned his head against the seat cushion, and closed his eyes. In no time him and his partner in the back seat were both sawing wood.

The Lincoln's air condition-

ing was a relief after the scorcher outside, but my problem was that I was dog-tired myself. With the empty road ahead of me shimmering in heat mirages and with those two guys inside the car snoring, I had to fight to keep my eyelids open. The scenery outside didn't help a bit, since it was the next thing to total desolation.

When the guy next to me shifted position in his sleep, it pulled his shirt loose and did nothing at all to cheer me up when I saw he had a pistol tucked in his belt. Why, I didn't know and had no interest in finding out. But it was a .22 automatic, one of those little belly guns, which made it a coincidence because I happened to be carrying one like it myself. Except I kept mine inside my boot and had no plans on using it. Him, who knew?

It was the gun that decided me to part company with those guys. I hadn't liked their looks to begin with, and suddenly I was liking them a lot less. I came to a speed sign that said forty-five and then one that said thirty-five and then the highway widened into the main street of a little town. It was one of those sandy, sunbaked places you wouldn't remember five minutes after you'd been there. I pulled the Lincoln over

in front of a cafe, and the two guys came awake.

"The hell you stoppin' for?"

"As far as I go, gents," I said.

"Thanks for the hop."

As soon as I stepped outside, the blast furnace smacked me. I thought a jolt of caffeine might jump start me back to life, so I went into the cafe. It was a vinyl and Formica joint with a few booths, half a dozen counter stools, and a ceiling fan that was spinning its blades around without doing any noticeable good. I took a stool at the counter and saw on the menu that the place was called Sid's Hollywood Deli. On the walls there were blowup photos of movie stars.

I was all alone there, but in a minute a waitress came out of the kitchen. She was a strawberry blonde with a lot of voltage in her grin. "Cook's gone for a few minutes, darlin'," she said. "Coffee?"

"You're a mind reader."

She was lanky and maybe thirty-five, with a redhead's complexion that didn't belong in that climate. The badge pinned to her uniform said her name was Jody. She poured me a cup and then, my luck, the two guys from the black Lincoln walked inside, took a booth, and grabbed a couple of menus.

"The hell they doin' with lox

in a place like this?" the guy who'd been asleep in the back seat said.

His partner, the one with the pistol tucked under his shirt, said, "That's easy. The joint's called Sid's." He told Jody, the waitress, that he wanted the lox, eggs, and onions.

"Hamburger," the other guy said. "And a beer."

Jody laughed. "Don't I wish. Soft drinks only, fellas. Food'll be a couple of minutes. Sid's stepped out."

That was when I left. Those two guys gave me the creeps, and besides, the coffee wasn't helping me any. The only thing I was a candidate for was some serious sleep. I was hoping for a park bench and a shade tree, but if there was anything green growing in that town, I sure never saw it. I did come across a motel that looked like my kind of place, though. Cheap. The VACANCY sign wasn't lit, but it would have been redundant because there wasn't a car on the premises. The units were built in a U, and in the middle, where there should have been a swimming pool, there was just asphalt. Hot asphalt.

I walked into the motel office, where a woman at the desk glared at me with what looked like genetic mistrust of the human race. I signed in with my

name, Leo Hinshaw, and left the other spaces blank. She didn't approve. She tapped the registration form with her finger and said, "You need an address."

"You can say that again." I wrote down Denver and made up a street number. It beat arguing. She took sixteen bucks and tax before she let me have a room key, meanwhile doing a good job of hiding any enthusiasm she had at having me for a guest. "And it's a pleasure doing business with you, too," I said.

The motel room was an oven when I walked in, a hundred and twenty degrees easy. It really wasn't my day. I switched on the air conditioner, took off my boots, and put my gun, my watch, and my wallet on the nightstand next to the bed. A shave and shower would have felt terrific, but first things first. I needed sleep a lot more. I didn't even bother turning the bedspread back. I just peeled off my shirt and my Levi's and collapsed. When I closed my eyes, I saw the highway coming at me, the way it does when you're on the road, but that lasted all of about two seconds before I went out like a stroke victim.

It was cooler in the room when I woke up but not actually down into the comfort zone, so I knew I couldn't have

been asleep very long. An hour, maybe. What woke me up was hearing somebody moving around the room. I sat up squinting and reaching for my gun, but a voice said, "Don't."

I didn't. There was enough light for me to see the muzzle of what looked like a cannon. The gentleman pointing it at me was wearing a police uniform.

"Leo Hinshaw?"

"That's me," I said. "Next time I'll use the deadbolt."

"Won't be a next time." He was a rangy-looking man with a Wyatt Earp mustache and a set of shoulders. "You're under arrest for suspicion of murder," he said, and his voice was tight with anger. He gave me my rights, including the one about a lawyer, and said, "You want a lawyer?"

"No, thanks. My last one got me six months."

"Let's do this by the book," he said. "Ease up and take the position now. Move real slow, or you're going to grow another belly button where you don't need one."

I moved slow. The police special in his hand was a good motivator. He put me against the wall, feet back and legs spread and all my weight on my arms. By swiveling my head, I could just see him out of the corner of my eyes. He was riffling

through my wallet with his free hand.

"You got a permit for that weapon?"

"You see one in there?"

"You must think this is some kind of metropolis," he said. "You walk down Main Street with a pack on your back, a guy your size? And don't expect anyone to notice you? I've got at least three witnesses'll place you over to Sid's. There's eighty-some dollars in here."

"There better be. It's all the money I've got. I was at Sid's. Ask the waitress if you want. She's a redhead named Jody."

"You shut your mouth. Everybody loved Jody. Two kids, she's got. Had. They don't even know their mama's dead yet."

"That shook me up. Hell, I'm human. She was so full of life. One minute you're pouring coffee at work and the next minute, boom, you don't exist any more? No fair. Life's so cheap these days it's like a dirty joke. I told the cop as carefully as I could, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the woman, and I'm sorry for her kids. But I haven't been in town two hours, and most of that time I've been right here sleeping.'"

"The guys they turn loose," he said. "For a lousy sixty dollars out of the till. Sixty lousy bucks. Is this gun loaded?"

"There's a round missing."

"Big surprise. She was killed with a small-caliber weapon. One shot."

"I've been hitching. I got bored yesterday. I plinked at a fence post."

"You shut up. I don't have to listen to you." Still with his free hand, he rumbled up my shirt and threw it at me. Then he did the same with my Levi's. It seemed to be a day for people feeling up my clothes.

"You can't bust me just for being a stranger in town," I said.

"There's some people outside," he answered. "I recommend ignoring them. You're gonna walk from here straight to the back seat of my unit. We'll move out brisk."

"I'm heading for San Diego," I said while I got dressed. "I've got a job at a restaurant promised there. It's not much of a job, but then again I'm not much of a cook. Maybe you've heard times are tough. I left Denver with a hundred and ten bucks and I've got eighty left. That's why I'm riding my thumb. I can't afford the friendly skies. The gun's for protection on the road. Maybe I'm dumb to be carrying it without a license. Probably I am. But I figure I'd be a lot dumber not to carry it."

He tossed my boots over. "Wrong. The dumb thing was

using it. Jody named you."

"What's that mean?"

"It means you can zip it up, mister. She said Leo did it."

"I don't believe you."

"That sure breaks my heart."

He cuffed my hands behind my back. "You were alone with her at Sid's. That pea-shooter doesn't make much noise, so nobody outside heard it. Only thing was, Jody was still alive when Sid got back. She told him Leo did it. Period, end of story. Move it out now."

"Run a ballistics check. You're wrong."

"I said move it." He gave me a shove, so I moved it. Outside, the heat walloped me. On the hot asphalt of the parking lot a crowd was assembled, ten or fifteen people including the crone from the motel office. The cop ushered me through, but before he was able to get me into the back seat of his patrol car, I felt a rock hit me on the shoulder. The cop slammed the door on me and turned to the crowd.

"Knock it off," he said. "You people disperse."

Fat chance. He fished something out of the front seat and went back towards the motel room. When he did, the crowd surged and started rocking the car. Since I was cuffed and locked in behind a metal grille, there wasn't anything I could

do about it. I was only glad the car had heavy-duty shocks; otherwise they would have rolled me over in no time. As it was, they had momentum, and another tip or two would have done it. But then the cop came back.

He was carrying a plastic bag with my .22 in it. That's what he'd gone back to the motel room for. Evidence. He climbed in behind the wheel of the car and drove out of the parking lot, honking the horn to get through the crowd. I heard gravel hitting the roof of the car when we pulled away.

"You've got a real bunch of sweethearts in this town," I said.

"Yeah? Be glad I didn't feed you to 'em. I told you Jody was well liked."

"Then why don't you find who killed her," I said. Except he thought he already had his man. I was a transient, I was broke, I was just out of jail, I had a gun that matched the murder weapon, and I'd been at the scene. It didn't take a rocket scientist to make a case out of that. "Where are we going?" I asked him, because he drove right through the main street of town to where it turned into highway again.

"County seat," he said.

And then I got it. Bingo. I couldn't catch his eyes in the

rear view mirror because of the screen separating us, so I had to make my pitch to the back of his head. Which I did. I told him about the two guys in the black Lincoln and that at least one of them was carrying a .22. I told him they'd been in Sid's the same time I was. I gave him a description of the two men and told him they were heading for Flagstaff. "You got a radio in this rig? Put out a call."

"A bushy-haired stranger did it," he said. "That's the oldest one in the book."

"You moron," I said, "you're losing time. I told you my gun won't match. Did you ever work in a deli? I worked in plenty. And you know what cooks call the breakfast that guy ordered? A Leo. A lox, eggs, and onions. An L-E-O. That's who Jody said shot her. Not me. The guy who *ordered* the Leo. She was talking to Sid, wasn't she? He understands deli shorthand. Ask him."

That got through to the cop, even though I could tell it galled him to lose his number one suspect. He stabbed his gas pedal, turned on his flashers,

and radioed ahead to the county seat. After that it still took the rest of the day to prove me right. But the state police picked the two guys up outside of Kingman, and when they ran a records check, it turned out they had rap sheets like phone books. Bailing out on those heavies was the smartest thing I did on that trip.

Actually, it was the only smart thing I did on that trip. Because nothing else came out right at all. The people in that nowhere town just couldn't find it in their hearts to take a liking to me. Even after I did my civic duty and testified at the grand jury, they still gave me ninety days in the slam for illegal possession of a firearm. And believe me, ninety was the coolest the temperature ever got during that stretch of time, even at night. On top of that, the eighty bucks I had? They fined me fifty of it for falsifying the motel registration. Try getting to San Diego on what that left me, even if the job was still open. Forget it. Like I said, it wasn't one of my better days.

Prickly Pairs

by Neil Jillett

The river gleamed as they ran across the paddock. Without looking back, the boy in the lead shouted, "Protestant dog, Protestant dog! Smells like a frog, smells like a frog!"

The other boy knew the proper reply. "Stupid mick, stupid mick! Makes me sick, makes me sick!" That was what kids from school yelled when they encountered one of the boys who were taught by the nuns. But now he did not even mouth the rhyme silently. Billy might turn and catch him at it.

Billy did turn round. He looked ready to start a fight. He always won, although Robin, just turned eleven, was a few months older and taller. He was heavier, too, but clumsy and timid compared with his adventurous enemy.

"Come on, Robin."

Billy was running backwards. The winter sun glinted on his red hair and bounced off the wind-ruffled willows by the river.

"Come on, Robin." The sneer in his voice matched the sneer on his face.

Robin's mother often told him why his name must not be shortened. Years later he could imagine how unspoken thoughts would have colored his parents' voices.

"Robin—after my brother—if that's all right with you, Clare?"

"It would save thinking up two names."

"Robin for a girl, Rob if it's a boy."

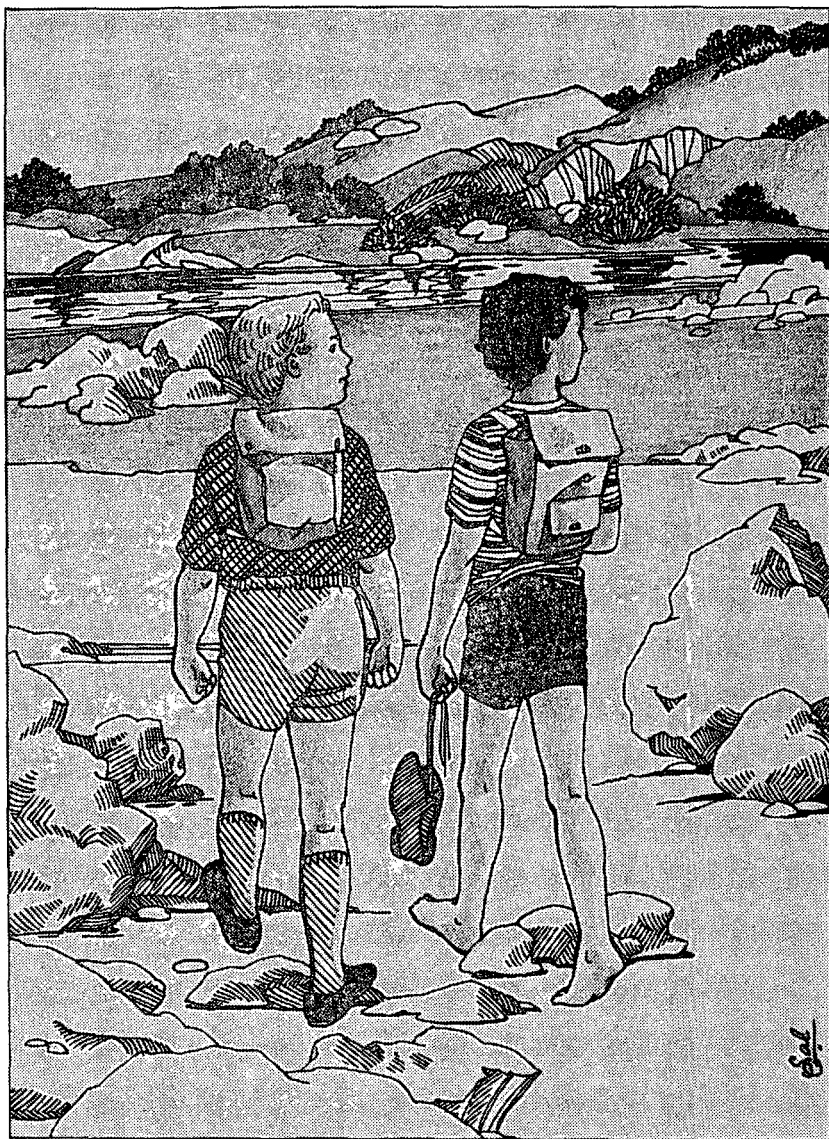
"Robin is what your brother was christened, John."

"But everyone calls him Rob. It's got a good, reliable ring."

"You give a child the name you intend to use. If you want to call him after your brother, fine. But—Rob. . . ? Frankly, John darling, it's, well, you know, it's. . . ."

His father often called him Rob, though not if his wife was likely to hear, since she thought it sounded common. Robin's friends learnt a similar caution when she was around. Otherwise, he was Rob.

But not to Billy. Billy never called him Rob. "Robin-Robin-Robin. What a sissy name!" Billy kicked at a tussock with his tough feet.



"HOW FAR'S THE SPECIAL PLACE?" ROBIN ASKED.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Come on, Robin, you fatso. Frightened of the water?"

When Robin, with the satchel dragging at his shoulders, came up to him, Billy set off again across the paddock, still in the lead, as if walking together would be an admission of equality.

"Hurry up, Robin, you lazy galoot."

For what seemed to be the millionth time Robin said, "Everyone calls me Rob."

"Not everyone, Robin." Billy knew how to pick a soft spot. "Not everyone does, you sissy liar. Not your *mummy*, she doesn't. *Mummy* calls her little baby Robin."

"Rob's what my mates call me." The word, which his mother had told him not to use, felt awkward on his tongue, but it was what Billy always said instead of friends.

"What mates, Robin?" Billy mimicked his pronunciation as well as giving that sneer to his name. "And who says I want to be your mate, fatso?" Robin knew there was no answer to that, and Billy went on, "Rob! A real tough guy's name. But you're not a tough guy . . . Robin. You've got a girl's name, Robin, and it fits."

Robin thought Billy was an even sissier name than Robin, though he would never dare to say so. But Bill, that really was a tough guy's name. He risked an outright plea. "Please call me Rob . . . Bill."

Billy waited for Robin to catch up again and then punched him in the chest. "Don't call me that. Billy, that's my name. It's my dad's name, too."

Was your dad's name, Robin amended to himself. Billy's father, a worker in the local quarry, had been killed in an accident three years ago.

"And when Father Sullivan baptized me—Billy Francis Patrick—he used holy water all the way from Rome. The pope blessed it."

"What's so important about that?"

Billy took this genuine inquiry as a blasphemous insult from someone who should know better by now, even if he was a Protestant. He punched Robin again. The boys fell over and wrestled, but only for a few seconds. Robin surrendered easily. Billy was satisfied to give him another thump before getting up and running off.

"Come on, sissy Robin. Or is mummy's little baby scared of going near the river?"

"Coming, Billy," Robin shouted back, deciding, as he had done nearly every day since he had arrived in Warwick, to make the

best of things. But it was hard trying to get along with someone you hated, especially when Billy said, "There's some prickly pears over there, Robin. Going to take them home and make a nice little garden for mummy?"

In Brisbane some of his friends from school lived in the same street. They were always in and out of each other's houses. Robin, though not a leader in their games, was a star in summer. He could swim better than anyone else.

"Come on, Rob," his father had said as they stood on the edge at the shallow end of the municipal pool. He poked the boy in the stomach. "A porpoise like you couldn't possibly sink."

The five-year-old Robin let his father carry him into the water. In a few minutes he learnt to dog-paddle, and on frequent visits to the pool he taught himself the main strokes. At the school's sports day, five years in a row, he won all the races in his age group.

He practiced duck-diving at the deep end to pick up a brick, to prove he could hold his breath and keep his eyes open under water, and pretending to be a rescuer, he found it easy to tow another boy his own size the whole length of the pool.

The day Robin was declared the best junior lifesaver in the district and awarded a certificate his father decided to join up.

"Why should you?" Robin heard his mother ask. "You're forty-two and hardly the warrior type."

"They need dentists as well as warriors in the forces."

"It's because of your brother Robin—"

"Rob!" His father's voice had a sharpness that Robin had never heard before. The much younger brother had not returned from a bombing raid over Germany. "The rest of us must get this business done with as quickly as possible. Especially now the Japs have joined in."

The argument was soon over. Robin's mother, who knew she could not win, did not even protest when her husband insisted on the move to Warwick, almost a hundred miles to the southwest.

"The way the war's going," he said, "we can't pretend Australia mightn't become the front line. The Japs could bomb Brisbane any time. I want you two safely out of the way before that happens."

Robin's mother dreaded the thought of being deprived of the seventeen-year-old girl who lived in and did all the rough housework and most of the cooking, but she dreaded even more the prospect of air raids.

So Robin's father became an army dentist "somewhere in the Pacific," and Robin and his mother went to Warwick. Although they were among the first to escape the threat of attacks on Brisbane, they left their move too late to find a flat or a house to themselves. They became Mrs. O'Hara's tenants, in her shabby little house on the edge of the town.

Billy's mother was a thin woman, redheaded like her son. She seemed to Robin so much older than his own pretty mother that she could be *her* mother.

"Not the type I'd choose as a bosom friend," Mrs. Curtis told Robin. "No horizons beyond domesticity."

She hoped that Mrs. O'Hara would share the cooking, or do most of it in return for having the kitchen tidied up for her afterwards. But Mrs. O'Hara, quickly assessing her tenant's limitations, said, "Two women in the same kitchen. It never works." She drew up a roster, headed *Me* and *You*, which set out the times when meals for the two families should be cooked and eaten, and pinned it on the broom cupboard.

Every day Mrs. O'Hara cleaned the house's small, dark rooms. With a damp cloth she wiped the Sacred Heart pictures and plaster Virgin and Child statuettes. Then she worked in the vegetable garden. Behind it was a wired enclosure in which chooks pecked and clucked. Mrs. Curtis wondered whether she should graciously accept as gifts the potatoes and carrots, the greens and tomatoes and eggs she was sure to be offered. Or should she suggest a token payment? But the offer was never made. Mrs. O'Hara sold to the corner shop any produce she did not need for herself and Billy.

Robin and his mother rented the room that Mrs. O'Hara said had been the lounge. Mrs. Curtis slept there on a bed that was turned into a couch during the day. A door opened onto a partitioned corner of the verandah. Here Robin slept. It was fun having a bed that was almost out of doors, although on windy nights the louvered windows rattled in a spooky way, making it hard to sleep.

If his mother heard him tossing and turning in the dark, she never said anything. She was more concerned to find ways of occupying the daylight hours. It did not occur to her that she should be a companion to her son. That was a father's role.

"This town doesn't seem to be a hive of social activity," she complained.

In Brisbane there had been bridge and tennis and rehearsals for amateur dramatics. Mrs. Curtis wondered whether giving all that

up was too high a price for being away from the dangers of war.

"It looks as if you'll be luckier than me, Robin darling, with a nice little friend all to yourself," she said.

But she soon found alternatives to bridge and tennis. She attended meetings of the Country Women's Association, where camouflage nets were woven for anti-aircraft guns and socks knitted for the troops. Such tasks were not for her, but she did help to pack food parcels for victims of air raids on London and other British cities. "They're a pretty dull lot at the CWA," she told Robin. "All they think about is recipes for scones and what time of the year is best for planting potatoes."

But she enjoyed the novelty of doing something useful and talking to women who had not heard her stories about rehearsing plays by Noel Coward and Somerset Maugham. To the sturdy country women she had a degree of glamor, and although she knew her status as a minor celebrity would not last long, she would make the most of it while it did. The pleasure she gained from the CWA meetings helped to take the strain out of her occasional attempts to be friendly to Mrs. O'Hara.

The two boys were not friends, but necessity made them companions.

Billy was not popular at the Catholic school. The other boys shut him out of their after-school and weekend games because of his readiness to pick fights and the ease with which he won. Robin, at his school, was the new boy who did not fit into established gangs and friendships. It was easier to put up with Billy and his temper than to try to push in where he was not wanted.

Robin was soon in awe of Billy, although he tried not to give him the satisfaction of showing it.

He admired the way Billy could always find something to do, even if it was only climbing a tree he had already climbed a hundred times. He envied Billy's ability to make a bow and arrow out of a whippy branch and the stem of a dry dockweed and the way he ran barefoot across grass or roads without complaining about burns or the gravel hurting his toes. Horror tinged but did not diminish Robin's admiration of the accuracy with which Billy threw stones, right hand or left, and knocked pigeons off the power lines. He was admirably shocked by Billy's ready use of words whose meaning neither of them understood.

He admired as much as resented Billy's assumption that he was always the leader, or if he wasn't leading it was only because Robin was not bold enough to follow. "Sissy!" Billy jeered as Robin watched him hop backwards and forwards across the railway line just outside town, when a train might come around the corner any minute.

One day Billy chopped off the head of a chook that Mrs. O'Hara said was ready for the pot. Although he shut his eyes and covered his ears to block out the sight and sound, Robin admired Billy's enthusiasm for the savage task.

He even admired him for having the confidence to say there were things he could not do.

"I'm going to learn to swim one day," Billy said. There was no embarrassment in the implied admission, only pride in the certainty that he could do whatever he set out to do. "Reckon it must be easy."

It did not occur to Billy that Robin might be able to swim, and Robin knew that if he told him he would be sneered at for lying and boasting.

Perhaps most of all Robin admired Billy for the openness with which he talked about being a Catholic.

Because his parents were not religious, Robin never thought about God much. He knew God was supposed to reward or punish people for being good or bad, but he saw no evidence that this was the way things worked out.

Billy, though, took God very seriously, or being a Catholic.

"When you're a Catholic, you can do anything you like and you don't get into trouble so long as you confess it afterwards," he said.

"Confess?" Robin was puzzled by this use of the word.

"Everyone knows what confession is except stupid Protestants."

But Billy did tell Robin a few things about being a Catholic and being a Protestant. Robin, for all his admiration, did not believe them, but he was interested enough to seek his mother's opinion, although he was careful not to say it was Billy who had told him these odd things. Mrs. Curtis knew she should have a word with Mrs. O'Hara.

"I really would prefer that Billy didn't tell Robin he's going to fry in hell because he's a Protestant," she said.

Mrs. O'Hara had taught her son most of his beliefs but did not fancy a debate with her Protestant tenant.

"You know what boys are like," she said.

"I wish you'd speak to Billy about it."

"Then he'll think your son's being tittle-tattling. Let them sort it out for themselves." She avoided Mrs. Curtis's eyes and looked at the *You* and *Me* roster on the broom cupboard. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm busy. . . ."

One day Billy showed Robin his rosary. "Protestants can't say the rosary. That's one reason they're damned for all eternity."

"What's saying the rosary?"

"Don't you smelly Protestant frogs know anything?"

It seemed to Robin strangely girlish of Billy to take such pride in what looked like a piece of jewelry. Yet this pride, so unembarrassed, was another reason he admired him. Any other boy would have been worried about being called a sissy for showing off a string of beads he kept in a little leather bag around his neck.

"Mum says I shouldn't carry it around with me," Billy said with rare softness, "but I tell her Jesus and the Holy Virgin wouldn't let me lose anything that belonged to my dad."

Robin tried not to let Billy know he could see the start of tears shining in his eyes, but Billy tucked the rosary back in the little bag and punched him and said, "Bugger off. I'm sick of playing with you, sissy Robin."

Robin saw no point in hanging around while Billy was in that mood, so he went off to do something he had been meaning to do for several days.

Not far from the house was a paddock where he had seen some cactus growing. He checked that there were no bulls or cows in the paddock, then climbed through the fence. There was a whole clump of cactus, greyish green, spiky, and blotched with what looked like the scabs that came when he grazed his knees. Some of the plants were nearly two feet tall, impressive and ugly, though not monsters like the ones he had seen in the cowboy serials at the Saturday matinees in Brisbane. Other plants were smaller than the palm of his hand.

He took out the pocketknife that had been one of the presents from his father last Christmas and dug out some of the baby cactus, careful to avoid the prickles. He wrapped the four best ones in his handkerchief.

Behind the hen run at Mrs. O'Hara's place he found a pile of old jam tins. He chose the least rusty, shaking them in case of spiders,

then filled them with soil and planted a cactus in each one. They looked good lined up on the sill, beneath the louvered windows, in his corner room on the verandah.

"They're pretty, dear," his mother lied. She had little interest in botany or gardening and even less knowledge, but she was glad Robin had found something to amuse him. "Don't forget to water them regularly."

The next day when he came home from school, later than usual because the whole class had been kept in for being noisy, he went to inspect the cactus. They were not there. He soon found where they had gone.

Billy was standing beside the battered oil drum that was forever smoldering in the back garden, fueled by household rubbish.

"Silly galoot," he shouted, stirring the drum with a stick. "Fancy trying to grow prickly pears. They're a weed, a pest. You can go to jail for that."

When Mrs. Curtis asked about the missing plants, Robin just muttered, but she worked out what had happened.

"I thought we'd agreed," she said to Mrs. O'Hara, "that Billy wasn't to come into our part of the house unless he was invited." "He doesn't."

"But he's taken those little plants from Robin's room."

"Must've got at them from the outside." Both women knew that the jam tins could not have been eased through the louvres. "Anyhow," said Mrs. O'Hara, forestalling debate on this point, "Billy's done the right thing, getting rid of those pricklies. Some fool brought them into the country years ago, and they've been a pest ever since, ruining the crops and the feed for the sheep and cattle."

"But they surely couldn't have done any harm on *our* windowsill."

"The way those things spread, they'd have been in *my* veggie patch before you could say Jack Robinson."

"But really, Mrs. O'Hara, I think Billy—"

"Boys have to learn to work these things out among themselves. Now, if you don't mind, I've got a meal to get ready."

Robin still admired Billy, despite what he had done to the prickly pears. But now he hated him, too, though he knew his mother was probably right.

"You're a prickly pair, you two," she said. "A' bit like me and Mrs. O'Hara. But we'll all just have to rub along together, at least until the war's over and we can go back to Brisbane."

One Friday afternoon towards the middle of the year, Billy said, "I'm going camping tomorrow. You can come, if you don't carry on like a sissy."

"I wouldn't be allowed to stay out all night," Robin said, sounding like a sissy before he could stop himself.

"Not all night, stupid. We'll just take some sausages and things and make a fire and cook them for lunch. We might build a cubby, too. I know a special place, down by the river."

Mrs. Curtis told Robin he could go. "It's nice to see you and Billy getting over your silly squabbles and being friends."

Billy carried the satchel, loaded with sausages and apples and biscuits, when the boys left the house next morning.

"Watch out for snakes, you two," Mrs. Curtis shouted after them, sounding, she thought, like a real country woman.

"There's no snakes around this time of the year," Mrs. O'Hara said. "They're hibernating." But she had already ordered her son to keep his shoes on, just in case.

As soon as they were out of sight of the house, Billy took off his shoes and socks and stuffed them into the satchel, which he then ordered Robin to carry. Unlike his mother, he was sure there were no snakes around. He knew the places they liked, and he hadn't seen one for weeks.

"Scared of snakes?" he said, when Robin made no move to take off his shoes.

Robin said nothing. He *was* afraid of snakes, but he was not going to say so. And it would be even worse if he complained about burrs and gravel.

Billy said, after the fight about Robin calling him Bill, that they could sit by the river for a while.

"How far's the special place?" Robin asked.

"About two hours — as the crow flies. I can go for hours and hours without stopping, but I suppose you need plenty of rests."

"Why are you always having a go at me, Billy?"

"Because you're a sissy and a smelly Protestant frog." Robin stood up, sick of this abuse. It wasn't worth it, just for the sake of having someone to play with. He wondered whether he should go home. But before he could decide that, Billy said unexpectedly, "And because you've got a dad."

"But he's at the war."

"But you've got one."

Robin sat down. Billy had taken out his rosary and was running the amber beads through his fingers.

"When my dad was killed . . ." Robin saw again those surprising tears in his enemy's eyes. He looked away, not wanting to spark the anger that would lead to another fight. But he knew, too, that he was turning his head so that Billy would not have the hurt of being thought a sissy, the hurt he was so ready to inflict.

"When they got him out from the bulldozer, his rosary, it wasn't even broken." Robin could hear the beads clicking. "Father Sullivan said it was a miracle."

Robin still dared not look at Billy. He was sure he was really crying now. The boys sat in silence for what seemed to Robin to be hours. Then he heard Billy stand up suddenly and say, "Reckon I'll learn to swim next year. Be as easy as falling off a log."

When Robin turned around, he saw there were damp smudges on Billy's cheeks. Without thinking, Robin tested the truce that the enemy seemed to have declared. "I could teach you, Billy," he said. "I was the best swimmer at my school in Brisbane."

Billy's sneer came back. "Bloody liar! A sissy like you, Robin, could never even poke your little finger in the water."

"I can, I can! And I've got a lifesaving certificate, too."

"Bloody sissy skite! You couldn't even save an old prickly pear if all you had to do was piss on it to stop it burning."

Billy still had the rosary in his hand. Fury—and the smudges, the signs of weakness, on his enemy's face—gave Robin courage. He grabbed the rosary and ran along the riverbank. "Leave me alone, or I'll throw it in."

"Don't you dare. You wouldn't dare, sissy, bloody Protestant Robin!"

The rosary arched out of his hand. It seemed to Robin, stunned by his own daring, to hang in the air before splashing into the river.

"Bastard, bastard, bastard!"

Billy was making no attempt now to hide his tears. He howled as if he was in physical pain. And then he jumped into the river.

The water came up to his waist. As he moved forward, groping hopelessly for the rosary, he slipped and his head went under.

Robin shut his eyes, too scared to look any more. When he opened them, there was no sign of Billy.

He knew what he should do, and couldn't do it, wouldn't do it. But he would have to run for help. And before he did that, there

was something else he must do, to let people know he was brave, not the sissy Billy had so often called him.

Holding the branch of an overhanging willow, he slid into the river. The current pulled gently at him. It was not the savage tug he had expected. It was almost as calm as the swimming pool in Brisbane. He put his head into the water because he knew that when he found help he would have to be wet all over. For a moment he opened his eyes. It was not as murky as he had expected. He could see the bottom and, more dimly, where it shelved into deeper water. Perhaps . . . But instead of doing *that*, he grabbed the willow branch with both hands so that he could change his grip and put his other arm in the water. Now he was completely soaked.

He climbed out of the river and ran for the help that he already knew would be too late.

A week after the funeral Robin's father came home on leave. The three of them had the house to themselves. Mrs. O'Hara had gone to stay with her sister in Toowoomba. His father's arrival and the retelling of the story brought on another outburst of tears.

"I ran and ran—"

"But not before he'd tried to save Billy," Mrs. Curtis said. "Even though he'd told him it was dangerous to paddle. But he dived in after him, without even taking off his shoes."

Her husband already knew the story, but happily listened to it again.

"The man Robin found, a farmer almost a mile from where it happened, the one who eventually recovered—" Mrs. Curtis lowered her voice to a whisper "—the body, said the river was very deep there, the current fast and treacherous." Embarrassed by the literary tone of her account, she paused before adding, "And the boys had become such good friends, really quite close."

"It took real courage." As he hugged his son, Major John Curtis, of the Dental Corps, felt his heart tighten with pride and with horror at how close they had come to losing him. "The best soldier doesn't have more guts than you, Rob." He looked at his wife across the boy's shoulder.

Mrs. Curtis nodded, accepting her husband's message. She never again called her brave boy Robin. Nobody did.

Mr. Banjo

by Charles Boeckman

A murder trial brought me back to my hometown. Whitaker. I would never have gone back there if a certain wealthy doctor's wife and her boyfriend had not decided to knock off the good doctor in a "hunting accident." Their clumsiness got them arrested for capital murder. They wanted, and could afford, the best criminal lawyer in the state. So they hired me, Roger Spencer. I come high, but I have a national reputation. Since they were guilty as hell, they were going to need the kind of courtroom miracles I could pull off.

Whitaker had changed little in the thirty-odd years since I left. I drove into town in my new car and turned slowly down Main Street, the setting of a thousand boyhood memories. Old Hester's pharmacy was now a chain drugstore. The front of the Bijou had been remodeled and was now the Ciné, but for the most part, the store fronts had the same depressing, slightly seedy look as when I'd grown up here. It was as if the Great Depression had settled

here and never left. I had the spooky feeling that if I walked into the barber shop, the calendar on the wall would read 1936.

Then I passed the corner where the First National Bank was still located, and suddenly I could hear a banjo plunking. It was a trick of memory, of course, because that was the corner where old Mr. Banjo used to sit on his apple box and play for nickels and dimes. After all these years, I could still see him clearly, a frail old man, his sightless eyes looking nowhere, his faithful old dog Rascal curled beside his box, and his banjo strumming merrily away.

Then the memories became chilling. I shivered and speeded up to get away from there, but the ghostly banjo music followed me down the street. I drove to the new motel where I had a reservation.

For the next twenty-four hours I was extremely busy, meeting with my clients and their local attorney, preparing for the first day of jury selection.

I was leaving the courthouse about four the next afternoon when a rather nondescript, gray, middle-aged man approached me. "Mr. Spencer—Roger . . . remember me?"

I put on my professional, public-relations smile. "Why yes, I think so. Let me see now . . ." (Actually, I hadn't the vaguest idea who he was.)

"Dick Frazer. I—I guess we've all changed," he said, apologizing for my not remembering him.

Again flashed a flood of memories—the banjo ringing faintly down the corridor of years—and a slight chill rippled down my spine. "Dick! Of course I remember," I said with genuine warmth, shaking hands with him. "Why, we were good friends. We hunted squirrels and rabbits after school."

"Had to," he laughed. "Food came scarce in those days. Remember the rattlesnakes we used to trap and sell?"

I shuddered. "Don't remind me! Like you said, though, money was hard to come by. So you're still living here."

"Yes. I'm running the town's newspaper—still a weekly like it always was. I took it over after my father passed away. Listen, do you have a minute for a cup of coffee? You're a celebrity now. I'd like to get a

story about you for this Friday's edition."

I could do that much for my boyhood chum. Dick Frazer. He'd been the only person in this entire town I'd given a hang about. I hadn't even come back for my old man's funeral. His sister, my Aunt Cynthia, sent me a wire the night his booze-riddled liver finally gave out. The wire said, "Your father died at eleven P.M. tonight." I had a strong urge to wire back, "So what?" but I guess we're all slaves to our conscience. I wired several thousand dollars to the funeral home here, told them to plant the old man in their best casket. I made only one stipulation—that they put a quart of cheap bourbon beside the body.

Over coffee at the local cafe, Dick said, "Roger, I guess you know this story I'm going to write will have the old 'local boy makes good' angle. You were the only one in our school crowd who had the sense to get out of this town and make something of yourself. Remember Kate Lowery, the prettiest girl in our class? Everybody said she'd be a Broadway star one day. Well, she's still here, running a dingy little dance studio for kids, supporting her no-good husband. Cecil Buford, our football captain—well, he's running a service station. Some

of them are dead now . . . ”

I knew what he was thinking; me of all people—Roger Spencer, son of the town drunk—the least likely of us all to make it big. Life has some curious twists.

We had our coffee and chat and Dick made his notes for the story he was going to write about me—the story I told him, of course. Nobody knew the real story except me and a couple of other people who have been dead for a long time. That's the one part of my life about which even my wife Ellen doesn't know.

We left the cafe together and walked to the parking lot. On the way, we passed the First National Bank corner.

“Hey, Roger, remember that old tramp that played the banjo here on the corner?” Dick asked.

“Sure,” I said, hurrying a little to get to my car.

“Mr. Banjo, we used to call him. He was a fixture on that corner for years. Remember how somebody got the crazy story started that he was one of those eccentric misers who went around in ragged clothes while he was hoarding a bunch of money hidden somewhere in his shack?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Would you believe it, for years after he disappeared

folks in this town rooted around that shack where he lived, hunting for his buried treasure. Of course they never found anything. Poor old guy never had more than the clothes on his back. But people like to dream. I often wondered what became of that old man. One day he just disappeared.”

“Not much telling. Well, I've got to get back to the motel, Dick. Have a lot of briefs to read. Sure nice talking to you again after all these years.”

“Same here.” He looked admiringly at my car as I slid behind the wheel. “So glad for your success, Roger. Again, congratulations.”

He said it a bit wistfully. I understood. He was one of many men who suddenly look around and find that middle age has arrived and they must face the fact that life is never going to deliver the promises it made when they were young.

“It's all in the breaks, Dick,” I said, and that was true. I'd just been one of the lucky ones. We shook hands, and I drove out of the parking lot. Dick and I had been close, but that was more than thirty years ago. Now we had nothing in common, and I probably would never see him again. I preferred to leave the past where it belonged.

In my motel room the large

vanity mirrored my reflection: a tanned, still handsome man, gray over the temples, but a body kept trim by the best-equipped gym in town plus regular golf at the country club. I took off my expensive suit, my imported Italian shoes, and the fancy wristwatch guaranteed not to lose over two seconds in two months. I put it on the dresser beside the picture of Ellen, my lovely wife, and Pam, our daughter, that I always carried with me.

I mixed a drink, then stretched out on the bed in my shorts. I'd brought along my banjo. I began idly strumming some chords. Playing the banjo was a hobby going back many years. I played for kicks and for charity shows back home. I'd found it an excellent therapy for unwinding the knots of tension that go with my profession.

Now the instrument brought the memories back again, this time in sharp focus.

Those had been hard times, growing up in Whitaker back in the thirties, but we kids made our own fun. My greatest treasure was a single-shot .22 squirrel rifle. Somehow my old man managed to stay sober enough one Christmas season to give it to me. Most of the time he spent in an alcoholic fog in some bar while I roamed

around town and into the country pretty much as I pleased. As Dick said, we spent a lot of time on the river bottom hunting squirrels and rabbits, and I had developed a little business trapping and selling rattlesnakes to an outfit in Florida that canned the meat. That paid for my .22 cartridges and the clothes my old man never quite managed to get around to buying for me. School was a sketchy affair, but I'd inherited a high I.Q. from my mother, who died when I was four. I read a lot on my own and made good grades despite all the times I played hooky to hunt.

I picked up music from that old blind beggar we called "Mr. Banjo." I'd once heard that his last name was Jones—Banjo Jones. I don't know for sure if that was really his name. He never told me. He probably didn't know himself.

He lived in a one room tarpaper shack out of town a way, between the city dump and the river. A familiar sight in our town was Mr. Banjo trudging in every morning to take his place on his apple box beside the bank. He'd be carrying his banjo and holding the leash of his dog Rascal. Rascal wasn't one of those fancy seeing eye dogs. He was just a big old mongrel, but he sensed with some kind of canine intuition that

Mr. Banjo was blind and did a pretty good job of leading him around.

Kids like Dick and myself were fascinated by Mr. Banjo. We'd stop by the bank on our way home from school to hear him whanging away on his banjo. All we had to do was drop a coin in his tin cup, and he'd start off like a jukebox. If we didn't have a nickel or penny for his cup, we'd drop a steel washer in. He didn't know the difference. He seemed to enjoy playing. He'd whang that old banjo like he was performing on a stage with a spotlight, showing his toothless gums in a grin and nodding his gray head to the time of the music.

I guess I made friends with old Banjo because we were both what you might call town outcasts. I was "that ragged Spencer kid," son of the town drunk. Most of the nice kids in town—like that snooty Kate Lowery that I had a hopeless crush on because she was so pretty—wouldn't have anything to do with me. The town just tolerated old Banjo because they felt sorry for him, I guess. In those days, every place had its town beggar. Mr. Banjo was ours.

My roaming around the countryside with my squirrel rifle sometimes took me down

to the city dump and past old Banjo's shack. Sometimes on Sundays (the only day he wasn't in town), he'd be sitting in front, sunning himself, Rascal curled at his feet. I began stopping off to talk to him. He was a strange old guy. I don't guess he had a full set of brains, but I liked to listen to him. He wouldn't talk much to people in town, so everybody thought he was a halfwit. I think it was because he was suspicious of people, but he trusted me. I'd get him started and he could tell stories by the hour. According to him, he'd been all over the United States before he came to Whitaker. He talked about cities like San Francisco, New Orleans, Memphis. To a kid who'd never been out of his home county, that was exciting stuff, even if most of it was lies. I guess it was listening to Banjo tell those stories that gave me the itchy feet that wanted to shake the dust of Whitaker off forever.

Old Banjo taught me what I know about music. He'd put my fingers on the strings of his beatup old instrument, showing me the way chords were made. I guess I had a natural ear because it wasn't long before I caught on. He must have liked me pretty much by then, because he hardly ever allowed anyone else to touch his bat-

tered old treasured banjo.

I don't know who the idiot was that started the rumor about Banjo's having a fortune hidden in his shack. I guess it was the hard times. People were so desperate for money, they liked to believe stories like that. It probably got started when somebody read about a ragged bum who died on skid row and the police found a bunch of money sewed up in his mattress. Things like that do happen all the time—misers who live in rags, with hardly enough to eat, accumulating a fortune, penny by penny, until they have hoarded a bunch of money they hide in their dwellings because they don't trust banks.

Of course it was ridiculous to think poor old Banjo had anything besides his dog and his banjo and the shack he lived in, but I heard the rumors. Guys down at the barber shop who didn't have anything better to do would speculate on how much Banjo had stashed away. It got to be a kind of game around town, guessing the amount. "See that old bum," somebody would say when Banjo shuffled into town, holding Rascal's leash. "He collects a lot of nickels and dimes and never spends a cent except for a few cans of beans every week. He's a miser. Must have

hoarded thousands of dollars. No telling how much he's got hid." Somebody added fire to the rumors by claiming they'd seen Banjo ride the bus into the county seat with a heavy tin box under his arm—and come back without the box.

It might have been a harmless game if Sheriff Buck Mayden hadn't decided to get serious about it. You saw a lot of law officers like Buck in the small towns back in those days, men short on brains, but long on muscle. Buck was a big, sullen man with a mean streak. Everybody was afraid of him. His way of keeping law and order was to pack a big six-shooter on his hip and bully people into respecting him.

Buck got to be sheriff when old Sheriff Honer died. Well, Buck hadn't been sheriff long before he started making life miserable for old Banjo. I saw him talking to Banjo in front of the bank. The next day, Banjo didn't show up in his usual place. That was the first time in my entire life I could remember that I didn't see Banjo with his dog, his cup, and his apple box on Main Street.

I went out to his shack, expecting to find him sick, but he was sitting out on his apple box, looking sad. "Sheriff says the city's got a law against beggars," he told me. "Sheriff says

I got to buy a license. I ain't no beggar. I play music for a living," he said with a stirring of pride.

"How much does the license cost?" I asked.

"Sheriff says it's twenty-five dollars to start and ten dollars a week after that. The old sheriff never told me nothin' about a license like that when he was living."

I whistled softly. That was a big sum of money in 1936. "You goin' to pay it?"

"Where'm I goin' to get money like that? Guess I'll have to move along. Don't much feel like it, though. I'm gettin' too old to go driftin' around the country. Always figured to spend the rest of my days here."

The next several days, whenever I went down to Banjo's shack, he was sitting in the same place out front, staring straight ahead, his blind eyes looking at nothing. I figured he didn't have anything to eat, so I cooked up some rabbit stew and took it out to him.

One afternoon, when I was approaching the shack, I saw the sheriff's car parked there. Buck drove one of those black 1934 Ford V-Eights that Clyde Barrow liked.

I sneaked closer to see what was going on. Buck was standing over Banjo, yelling at him.

The old man looked scared. "You got that twenty-five dollars. I know you have. That and a lot more. Now where is it?"

Banjo made some kind of frightened, pleading sound, holding up his hands as if to protect himself. He kept shaking his head vigorously when Buck asked about money.

Buck uttered a scorching swear word and stomped into the shack. I heard him throwing things around in there. It sounded as if he were tearing the place apart, board by board. I hid behind a bush. My heart was thumping. Like everyone else in the county, I was afraid of Buck Mayden. Wasn't a thing I could do but sit there and watch.

After a while, Buck came out, looking mad and frustrated. "Where is it, you old fool? Where you got that money hid?"

"Ain't got no money hid," Banjo whined.

"The' hell you ain't. You stingy old miser. You been hoarding them nickels and dimes for years. Where you got them hid?"

Banjo just kept shaking his head. Buck suddenly grabbed him and gave him a hard shaking. It was like shaking a sackful of rattling bones.

Rascal was growling fiercely. Then, to protect his master, he

charged Buck. He sank his fangs in Buck's leg. Buck let out a howl of pain and fury. He shook the dog loose, then drew his big old six-shooter and shot Rascal dead.

Poor old Banjo let out a cry of grief. He knelt on the ground beside the dog that had been his companion for so many years. Buck grabbed Banjo again and started giving him a terrible pistol whipping. He'd stop from time to time, sweating and panting, and demand to know where Banjo had his money hidden, but Banjo would only shake his bloody head and beg the sheriff to stop hitting him.

Finally Buck yelled, "Well, if you ain't got no money, then you're a vagrant and you're goin' to jail! Get in there!" and he threw Banjo into the back seat of his car.

I sat behind the bush a long time after they'd left, feeling sick. Finally I went down and dug a hole behind the shack and buried Rascal. I made the grave as nice as I could, and put a piece of broken concrete that I dragged over from the dumping grounds for a headstone and wrote "Rascal" on it with a pencil.

There wasn't much left inside the shack. Buck had ripped the mattress apart, torn up the flooring, cut Banjo's few clothes

to shreds. I found the old banjo and tin cup in the wreckage and carried them home with me.

Next day, I went down to the jail. The sheriff's office with its two cell jail was situated in a little brick building near the outskirts of town. Respectable people never went near the place. I knew where it was because my old man spent a lot of Saturday nights there, sleeping off drunks.

Buck was leaning back in his swivel chair, his boots crossed and propped on his scarred desk. He was chewing a match and reading the *Police Gazette*. When I came in, he glanced up. "What do you want, kid? I ain't got your old man in here today."

"I wonder if I could see Banjo," I said.

He went back to reading. "Can't nobody see him. He's a dangerous prisoner. Got him in solitary confinement."

I screwed up my courage to ask, "How come he's in jail?"

"Attacking an officer, resisting arrest. Vagrancy. Mostly vagrancy."

"How long's he gonna be in jail?"

"Till he can pay his fine."

"Where's he gonna get the money?"

"Oh, he's got it. He's got a lot of money hidden somewhere,

but he's too tight-fisted to tell anybody. He'd rather rot in jail. Now go on, beat it, kid."

I stood on one foot, then another, thinking fast. "Well," I said, "me'n ol' Banjo's pretty good friends. I'd sure like to see him get out of jail. Maybe if I could talk to him, he'd tell me where his money is. He trusts me."

Buck slowly lowered his *Police Gazette*, gave me a thoughtful look as he sucked on his match. Finally he spat out some frayed match pieces, got up, and took the cell key out of his pocket. "You find out where he keeps his money's so's he can pay his fine and we'll let him go."

"How much is his fine?"

"That depends. First you find out where his money is."

Buck unlocked the cell door. I went in. Poor old Banjo was lying on a smelly bunk. He looked real bad. The blood was dried and crusted on his face and in his gray hair. It was plain to see he'd had no medical attention. Probably nothing to eat, either.

"Hi, Banjo," I said, trying to sound cheerful. "It's me, Roger. I came to see you."

He turned his sightless face slowly, painfully in my direction. "Hello, boy," he whispered faintly.

I said, "I brought your banjo.

Figured you'd like to have it. It wasn't hurt none."

For the first time he showed a little life. He reached out with shaking hands. I put the banjo in his hands and he hugged it close. Some tears rolled out of his eyes. That surprised me. I didn't know blind people could cry.

I looked around to see if Buck was listening, but he'd gone back up front to his desk. "Here's a candy bar," I whispered, sneaking it out of my pocket. He thanked me, but he put it beside him without eating it. I guess he was too sick to eat.

"Buck said he'd let you go if you pay a fine," I said.

He shook his head. "Ain't got no money to pay a fine." He turned his face to the wall. "I'm going to die here."

He wouldn't say anything else. I finally called Buck to let me out of the cell. I looked back once. The old man was lying there, hugging his banjo, his face turned to the wall.

"Well?" Buck demanded. "Did he tell you?"

I shook my head and Buck muttered some cuss words.

I went home, got my rifle and spent the rest of the day down on the river bottom plinking around and checking the rocks for rattlesnakes. I was feeling pretty low. I couldn't sleep

much that night, thinking about poor old Banjo. There wasn't any use talking to anybody in town about him. Nobody was going to cross Buck Mayden over a worthless old beggar. Banjo was going to die in that jail, just like he said.

Sometime during the night I hit on a way I could save Banjo. I sat straight up in bed, sweating and scared, my heart pounding. I tried to stop thinking about it, but I couldn't. Finally I knew I was going to do it.

The next day I skipped school and made a trip out to Banjo's shack. Then I hiked back to town. It was early afternoon when I got to the jail. Buck scowled when I walked into his office. "You back again?"

I wet my lips and swallowed hard. "Could I please see Banjo one more time? I sure want to get him out of jail. Maybe he'll tell me today about where the money's hid."

Buck was in a real mean, sullen mood. "Don't know why he'd tell you when he won't tell me. That's the stubbornest old miser I ever saw. He'd rather lay there and die than tell me where his money's hid."

"Let me try," I pleaded. "He came close to telling me yesterday."

Buck gave me a hard, suspicious look. "How do I know if

he tells you, you won't run out there and dig the money up and keep it yourself?"

"Then how could I get Banjo out of jail?" I pointed out. "Please; he's gonna die if I can't get him out soon."

I guess I did a good job of convincing him. He scowled at me hard but said, "Well, it won't hurt to try. He's sure not going to tell me. But let me warn you, you're in big trouble, boy, if you try to make off with that money. I'll throw both you and your old man in jail."

He took me back to Banjo's cell and left us alone for a while. Banjo was worse than the day before. He was only partly conscious. I leaned over his bunk, whispering to him.

When Buck came to get me out of the cell, I said, "Well, he told me."

Buck's eyes lit up like the electric sign in front of the Bijou. "You tellin' the truth, kid?"

"Sure. I know where to find it."

"Well, I'm not trusting you. Come on. We'll go out there and you'll show me where it is."

Buck got his Stetson hat and buckled on his big six-shooter. We drove out of town fast in his V-Eight Ford. We went down the dirt road to Banjo's shack in a cloud of dust. When we got there, I led the way around the shack in the direction of the

dump grounds. Finally I pointed to the rusting remains of a Model T. "Under there. He's got it buried there."

"Whoopee!" yelled Buck. "You stay back here, kid," he warned me. He ran to the wrecked car and started digging wildly, throwing trash and loose dirt aside. There were dark sweatstains around the arms and neck of his shirt. I heard him give a panting exclamation when he came to the can. He clawed the lid off and plunged his hand down for the money.

Then he let out a bellowing scream and leaped to his feet. Dangling from his arm was the big diamond-backed rattlesnake I'd put there earlier that day. The snake's fangs were sunk in Buck's wrist. He screamed again with pain and fright. He shook the snake off, yanked out his six-shooter, and blew its head off.

I'd stood there, petrified. Now I broke into a dead run, back to Buck's car. I grabbed the keys out of the ignition and sprinted toward the woods. Behind me I heard Buck's enraged bellow. "Come back here, you lousy kid!" I ran all the faster, zigzagging around the trash in the dump grounds. I heard the roar of his six-shooter. The buzz of .45 slugs were around me like angry hornets. Then I reached

the woods and plunged into the brush. I heard him coming after me, crashing limbs. He was sobbing and bellowing with a mixture of pain, fright, and anger.

For a long time I ran through the brush along the riverbank with Buck floundering and crashing behind me. Luckily, I'd spent so much time down here I knew every trail and bush.

I don't know how long Buck chased me, but at last I heard a final crash in the brush behind me, then silence. I crept back to make sure it wasn't a trick. It wasn't. Buck was sprawled out on his back, staring up at the sky with glassy, scared eyes. Sweat was pouring off him. His arm was swollen up like a balloon. It was turning purple.

It took a long time for Buck to die. I sat on the ground and watched. He got delirious. He'd cuss for a while, then he'd sing. Sometimes he'd try to get up, but he'd fall back down and lie there. Finally, at sundown, he died. I waited awhile, then went over and looked down at him. His bulging eyes were staring straight up at the sky like glass marbles about to pop out of the sockets. I forced myself to reach in the pockets of his sweat-soaked clothing for the jail keys. Then I ran back to his car.

It was dark when I drove up to the jail. I made sure no one was around; then I went inside, turned on a light, and unlocked Banjo's cell. "It's me, Roger. Come on. I'm going to get you out of here."

Two things: I had to get us away from this town before people started looking for Buck, and I had to get Banjo to a doctor.

The old man was so weak I half-dragged him out to the car, but he wouldn't leave his banjo behind. He lay down on the back seat, still hugging his banjo while I drove out of town.

I figured it might be several days before somebody found Sheriff Buck Mayden, but I drove all night to be on the safe side, crossing the state line about dawn. The first large town I came to, I asked how to find a hospital that had a charity ward. It wasn't long before I had Banjo in the county hospital and a doctor was working on him. I went to get some breakfast and I ditched Buck's car on the other side of town.

When I got back to the hospital, they'd cleaned Banjo up and he looked nice and peaceful in a hospital gown on a bed in the charity ward. He was sleeping. The awful look of pain was erased. A nurse told me they'd given him a shot to make him comfortable.

I hung around the hospital most of that day. I told them Banjo was my uncle and that he got all banged up when he fell off a horse. His foot was caught in the stirrup and the horse dragged him. I'd read about that happening to a guy in a pulp Western story.

That night I slept on a park bench. The next morning I went to see Banjo again at the hospital, but his bed was empty.

The doctor saw me and called me aside. He explained that Banjo had died peacefully in his sleep during the night. "We did what we could for him, but he was a very old man." He asked if we had any money and I said we didn't and he said that he'd arrange for the county to bury the old man.

They gave me a small bundle, the bloodstained rags he'd been wearing when I brought him in and his banjo. I went down to the park bench where I sat alone and cried a little.

I hit the road after that. I did what a lot of young guys were doing those Depression years. I worked the C.C.C. camps and roughnecked in the oil fields.

In 1938, I was roughnecking in an oil field near Seguin, Texas. Wherever I went, I always took Banjo's beatup old instrument with me. I was in my rented room one night,

plunking some chords, trying to learn a tune that was popular that year. The head on the banjo split. I took it apart to see if I could fix it. It was easy—a blind man could do it. When I removed the head, I found pasted inside the banjo five one

thousand dollar bills. That was a lot of money in those days—enough to take a smart kid out of the C.C.C. camps and oil fields and put him through law school.

I've liked banjo music ever since.

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

After entering the hall, Abou Ben 'Ad 'Em kept his left hand in contact with the wall as he wandered round the rooms. By the time he reached his first room in the third row from the top, his left arm began to ache, so he changed over to the right-hand wall and, hugging that, arrived at the Treasure Chamber without difficulty.

Double Image

by Robert W. Alexander

I have a small apartment and a color television, but every time something goes wrong with one set, I have to junk it and steal another. I'm a small-time burglar who struggles to make ends meet; otherwise, I'd buy a color TV and stop worrying. I stay glued to the set until the last color show is over, then go out and earn my livelihood by stealing whatever isn't too risky.

But a neighbor moved next door to me three months ago, a most beautiful neighbor, who has piles of deep-toned red hair, brown inquisitive eyes forever changing expression, and an outstanding . . . I mean to say, she's a dancer and naturally has a trim, presentable appearance.

Hazel isn't at all like the other tenants. She embarrasses me at times, even though we're pretty good friends. She lets me run errands for her, so I wasn't a bit surprised when, during my last TV crisis, she rushed to my aid, but she insisted on giving more help than I wanted.

What could I do?

"For crying out loud, Albert," she groaned. "Who'd you buy this one from?"

It was the third set she had seen in my place in as many weeks. Of course, Hazel doesn't know I steal the things.

While I mumbled, she looked behind the set and found the label, Morton's TV, with their phone number.

"I'm going to call them," she said.

"Oh, no, no," I rattled. "Don't bother tonight."

I don't have a phone, but she does. She took my hand and physically pulled me over to her place. She's surprisingly strong for being only five foot four. As a matter of fact, we're both the same height.

"You're too easygoing," she said as we crossed the balcony. "It's not eight yet. They're open till nine."

She wouldn't hear babbled protests. With a determined wink, she phoned and upbraided them with chosen words for *selling* me a poor set.

"Relax," she said. "They're sending a man right over."

"Relax?" I repeated.

"Thanks, ever. I'll run next door and wait for him."

As I dashed to my place, plan one formed: don't answer the door. I discarded it for plan two: hide the TV in my kitchen (I only have a bachelor apartment) and tell the serviceman he had the wrong address, that I didn't even own a television.

But I plotted without consulting Hazel, who had followed me back. She just prances in any time, as though we're intimate family members.

The first day I met Hazel, and her boyfriend, I was sitting on the balcony drinking coffee when she ventured out. I guess she thought it was a private balcony.

Having just gotten up, she stretched, yawned, and then leaned on the railing. One look at her and my mouthful of coffee jumped into my windpipe. Oh, she wore a flimsy white thing for a robe, but, my gracious! It was way too short and far too scanty to be construed a bathrobe.

Hazel has remarkable reserve during perplexing situations. After her first surprise, she recovered her poise instantly.

"You don't have another cup?" she asked, meaning some of my coffee.

I hastily assured her I did,

but just then we both heard her door buzzer.

"It's open, Sam," she called. "It's just my boyfriend," she told me.

He was a big guy with a square jaw, muscled arms, and hands the size of waffles.

"This is Sam Cutter," she said. "I'm Hazel Sedure."

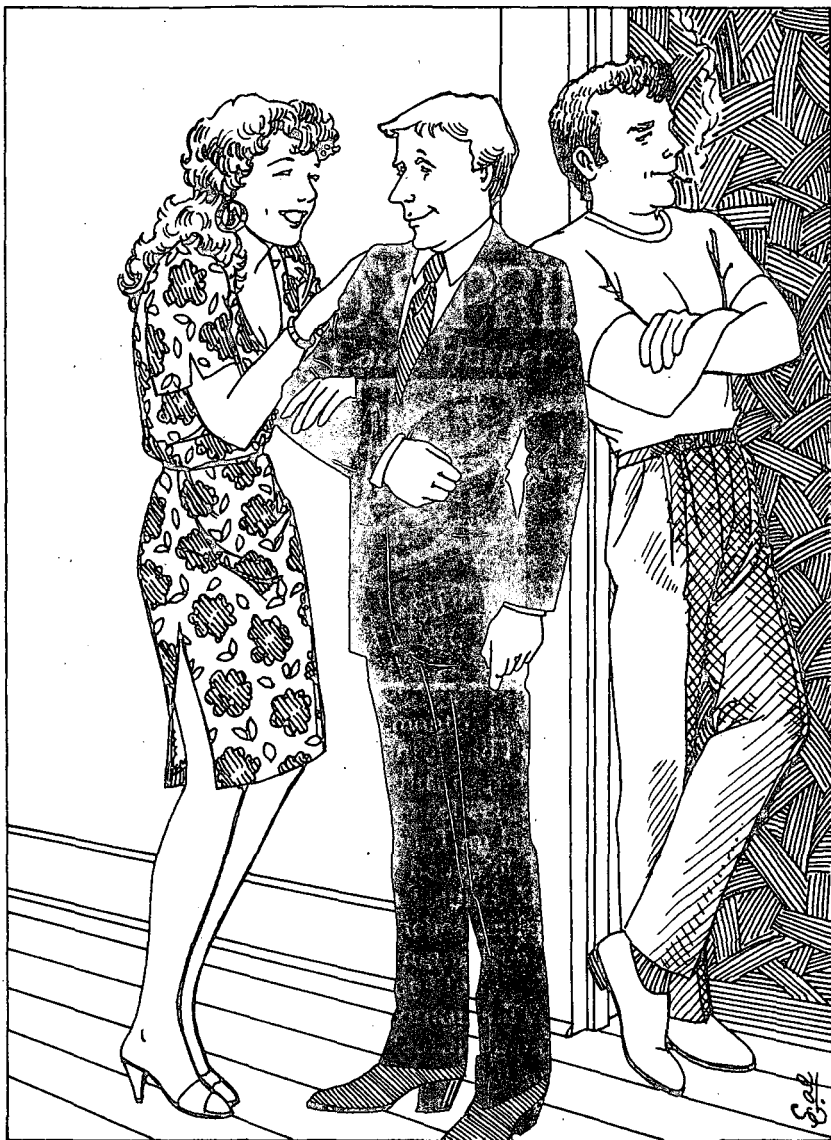
"I'm Albert. Albert Freckle," I said, offering him my small hand. He glowered down at me a moment, then exploded a laugh in my face.

"Ha!" he boomed. "Hello, Albert," he said, making my name sound ridiculous. He caught up my hand and crushed it to a pulp. He applied the terrible pressure longer than necessary to get me to wince in front of Hazel, but I didn't. I bit on my dentures and kept the tears from my eyes as though my life depended on Hazel's not knowing I was losing a hand.

"Isn't he cute?" Hazel said. "He's getting me coffee."

"I'll fetch us all a cup," I said hurriedly. Sam had to release my hand. I stumbled in my kitchen with aching fingers, but I was more hurt by what Hazel had said. She didn't realize it was an affront for a woman to call a man "cute." Besides, I'm as tall as she is.

I couldn't balance three cups with my throbbing hand, so I used a silver tray I'd acquired



SAM STOPPED LAUGHING. "LEAVE THE FIFTY BUCKS IN THE WALLET," HE WARNED.

erroneously. Sam accepted a cup, then stared at me and again emitted a vulgar laugh.

"Sorry," he said. "You look like my uncle."

I certainly resented that! If anything, I'm a year or two younger than Sam Cutter. I'm twenty-seven. I lost my teeth because of bad water, though I'll admit I lost some of the front ones sticking up for my rights before I learned I wasn't endowed to offer physical contention.

"Sam, he does not," Hazel chided him. "Maybe the same size, but Albert's better looking. Be nice, Sam. After all, Albert's my neighbor. I'll feel safe with him next door."

"Yeah," Sam grinned. "I'll feel safe, too." He laughed, flashing his white teeth like a showoff. Sam has dark curly hair, and big as he is, I suppose women find him handsome.

He tolerated my being around Hazel. Hazel likes to play cards, and dashes over to my place or has me over to hers when she is bored. I enjoy her company more than she knows. I've never dated. I could never afford it. By the time I pay rent, utilities, and feed myself, I'm lucky to make ends meet. I've always wanted to date girls, of course, but a fellow my size would need scads of money to win favor from *any* girl.

Sam didn't even frown when he caught me playing cards with Hazel. I kept my eyes on my cards, stirred my coffee, and busied myself in other ways, but Hazel was certainly a revelation to me. I was amazed to learn that girls are like other people. At least, Hazel is.

When she plopped herself down in my chair to wait for the serviceman, I could feel the perspiration bead on my forehead as I chewed an index fingernail. Hazel wrinkled her nose encouragingly.

"He'll be here soon," she said. "Honest, Albert, I know you like TV, but this is ridiculous. Stop fretting."

I suffered double apoplexy when the man from Morton's TV knocked on the door.

"I hope you can fix it," Hazel greeted him. "This is the third set Mr. Freckle has had this month."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, taking his eyes from her to inventory me. Then he stalked over to the set, pulled it out from the wall and gave us both a curious glance before he got down on his knees behind it. He was no dummy.

His head suddenly popped up and he looked me squarely in the eyes. "Where'd you get this set, Mr. Freckle? It's never been set up for service."

I felt the thyroid cartilage in

my thin neck bobble. "From a man," I said.

He got up slowly and placed his screwdriver-holding hand on his hip. "You didn't buy it from me," he said ominously, then suddenly whipped his accusing eyes to Hazel. "I thought it was phony. Your name wasn't listed among my customers." He turned his set jaw towards me. "This set was stolen from my store. I'm calling the police."

"I don't understand," I said.

Hazel puzzled a moment, biting at her lip. "Don't worry about it, Albert," she said. "It only means, if the man's right, that you might have purchased a stolen set."

"That's what happened," I agreed.

After he used Hazel's phone it was only minutes before two policemen arrived. One was a lieutenant named Maxson, a stocky man with a tired face, and he was all business. He listened to Mr. Morton's assertions, asked Hazel what part she had in it, and then turned to me. He wanted a description of the man from whom I'd bought it.

"He was a big, short man. I mean," I corrected, "he was stout. Husky and small."

"What'd he look like?"

"He had mean eyes—"

"Be more specific."

"He had gray hair except where he was bald. Large, ah, blue mean eyes, a mustache, and he talked with a slur."

"What kind of slur?"

"Ah, like a Swede with a Spanish accent."

Morton interrupted. "If you want my opinion, *this* is the guy who swiped it." He nodded toward me.

Hazel rallied to my defense. "Don't be ridiculous," she admonished. "If he stole it from you, would he phone you to come fix it?"

"Yeah!" I echoed. "Would I?"

Morton wouldn't concede a thing. Angrily he said, "It's got my label. It's my set, but I never sold it. I'm taking it."

Lieutenant Maxson wouldn't let him. He explained that it had to be impounded and later identified with a factory invoice. He got Morton to help the uniformed officer take it to the station in Morton's truck.

I admired the way Morton and the policeman easily carried the set to the door. It was heavy. I had struggled for two of the wee hours in the morning to get it upstairs.

"How much did you pay for it?" the lieutenant asked me.

"Three hundred dollars."

"There you are!" Morton exploded at the door. "This set costs six hundred dollars. He knew it was stolen."

"I did not," I said, alarmed when the lieutenant regarded me with a frown. "The man said it was guaranteed unconditionally for two years, and if I ever had any trouble I was to call him." I figured my best bet was to cast suspicion on Morton, and quickly. I looked at him. "I think you've got a racket," I said. "You send a guy out and sell a set cheap, and then you come along, claim it was stolen, and take it back."

Morton was furious. He set his end of the set down like he meant to punch me. The lieutenant waved him back.

"Don't forget," Hazel cut in, "Mr. Freckle will be in the market for another set."

"I don't want none of his junky stuff," I said, then turned to Lieutenant Maxson and complained about losing my mythical money. He didn't hear me. He was busy shoving the ruffled TV man outside. I thought I had fared pretty good, until Maxson turned around and triggered the guillotine.

"Come down to the station in the morning," he said.

I felt sick again. "Why?" I protested. "It appears the set *was* stolen, but he got it back."

"I need your statement," he said, tapping a cigarette. His eyes again bored into mine. "Routine. Who you are, where you work, and your where-

abouts when the set was stolen."

"Of course," I nodded.

I closed the door after him, knowing I couldn't go to the police station in the morning. Color television had upset my whole life. I'd have to leave my hometown where I knew how to pilfer and peddle safely.

"You're pale," Hazel said. She pulled me over to her place. "You need a drink. What'll you have?"

I was in shock. "Adrenaline over the rocks."

She laughed at my pathetic attempt to smile. When she gave me a drink I tilted the glass and swallowed large gulps.

"Albert, you're a crook," she said.

"You're smiling—"

"I'm nearly hysterical."

"You can't be serious," I said indignantly. "You don't believe—" I could see that she did.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Run." I was amazed she wasn't angry. "I don't have a job. He'll know I stole it."

"You don't work?"

"People won't hire me. I can't do anything."

"You just steal?"

"Little things."

"The TV was pretty big."

"A big mistake."

She bit her lip and studied me. When she does that, I get nervous and squirm. I'm suddenly conscious of how beautiful she is.

"Albert, do you like me?" she asked.

I had never dared think about it. The blood rushed to my face. I tried to drink from my empty glass, and the ice cube slipped into my mouth.

"As ah friend," I garbled.

She cocked her head. "No other way?"

"You have a boyfriend," I said desperately. "I'd never presume—"

"Albert, don't be shy! Look, do you like me well enough to trust me?"

I nodded.

"All right, then. I'll help you. You can go to the station tomorrow and bluff it through. Tell them you were with me the night you stole the set. I'll back you up."

"At four in the morning? Never!"

"Oh, brother," she sighed. "You're impossible. Tell you what, Albert. Sam will be here after work. He'll fix a story for you."

"Don't tell Sam," I protested.

"Take it easy. Sam's been in and out of jams so many times he even lies to himself."

"Sam?" I thought Sam was a respectable bartender at the

roadhouse where Hazel danced, but I'd never been there because I couldn't afford it. I still didn't want Sam to know about me. I didn't trust him.

I pleaded for her not to tell Sam, but she shook her head. "You need an out."

We were playing cards when Sam arrived. Hazel told him everything.

"Him?" he said, pointing a finger at me. "A thief? I don't believe it." He slammed a fist on the table that sent our cards flying and roared with disgusting mirth. "I don't believe it," he repeated.

"Stop it, Sam," Hazel petulantly cautioned him. "Come on now. You're the expert with alibis. What should he tell them?"

Sam thumbed his chin thoughtfully, staring at me like I was on exhibit. "A cinch," he said, flashing his oversized teeth. "He tells the cops he works for me at Marty's. What night?"

"Tuesday—way past midnight."

"So you were working Tuesday night till Wednesday morning. Tell 'em you mop up the place. You're the flunky. Have the cops call the club. I'll have it fixed for you."

Intuition told me to agree, go next door, pack my bag, and leave town forever. "I don't

know how to thank you," I said, starting to get up.

He grabbed my arm. "Wait," he said. "Maybe there's a way."

"Now, Sam," Hazel warned. "No strings."

That was exactly what I was afraid of. Sam had studied me like I was expendable. His strings could be ropes and chains.

"I got an idea," Sam said.

"Don't pull Albert into any of your schemes," Hazel threatened.

"Will you listen?" Sam growled. "I'm doing him a favor. The peanut doesn't have a TV, does he? Ya want him to sit over there and cry? I'm gonna get him one without risk."

"A color set?" Hazel asked dubiously.

"Sure. Color."

"Where?"

"At Marty's."

"Rob your uncle?"

"In a way. The place is gonna be robbed. You know how business is. Uncle Marty had to let you and the girls go. I served the most drinks to myself tonight."

"I can believe that," Hazel agreed.

She was frowning at him, and I thought I detected an estrangement developing. I hoped Hazel had been Sam's girlfriend only to hold a job.

Along with the bait of a free color set, I was tempted to stay.

Sam ignored her retort. "Here's how it is," he explained on one side of his face. "I sold Marty's liquor stock and fixtures. The guy's got a van to haul it away, out of state. Can't be traced."

Hazel frowned. "You crossed your uncle?"

"Sure. Marty's got insurance. He'll make out like a bandit, collect full value. He can redo the joint in style and hire everybody back."

"He'll kill you."

"Not Uncle Marty. He'll go for the idea, but if I told him now, he'd want the five grand I'm getting. You know him."

"I sure do," Hazel flared. "You both talked me into per-juring myself when you burned his place in the East. A sure thing, you said. I spent six months in jail."

"All right. I served *two years*. It was Marty's idea. He owes me this. Pure fluke we were caught. I took the rap—"

"We took the rap," Hazel stormed. "Look what it did to my career. I can't get a decent job, and the money he promised—you promised—for that six months. Ha!"

"Easy, baby," Sam soothed. "I'm doing this for us. Marty will make out with the insurance. I'll see he pays you."

"Ha!" Hazel said. "What about Albert?"

Sam was glad to change the subject. "Just a favor. He's your friend. I'll let him take the TV from Marty's office before the place is cleaned out."

Much as I wanted a color set, I decided to decline the offer. "Thanks, but—"

Sam's face turned mean. "Listen, shrimp! Without me, you go to jail. And don't think of running. You know too much. Besides, I need a favor from you, too."

"What favor?" Hazel asked.

"He's got to pose as my uncle." He turned to her. "Now don't look like that. These guys have heard Marty's a midget—like him. They think Marty's a part of it. The liquor alone is worth ten grand, but they don't want a squawk from the owner. Look! All Albert has to do is put on one of my uncle's suits and stand around. I'll get him one."

"Then what?" Hazel said.

"Nothing. The guy will hand him the dough, and Albert slips it to me. Won't take two hours."

I could only nod agreement when Hazel eyed me sympathetically. "I'm sorry," she said.

"So what's to be sorry?" Sam asked. "We all make out. Shorty even gets a color TV. No problems."

I worried about it all night. I had the feeling that Sam had

conjured the whole scheme when he learned about my trouble; that he had other plans for me he wasn't telling. In the morning I was on the verge of packing my bag and running, but Hazel came over, primly dressed in a white cheongsam with breathtaking slits from the hem upward.

"I'll drive you down," she offered.

Without her to bolster me, I'd never have gone to the police station. She waited in her car as I entered the place with a palpitating heart. Lieutenant Maxson was there. He listened to my story, taking notes, and then called the nightclub.

"Does an Albert Freckle work for you?" he asked.

I heard the voice boom back on the phone. "Who? Naw! Never heard of him."

Maxson hung up the phone and drew a circle on his scratch pad. "You hear him?" he asked.

I nodded, almost with relief. I guessed Sam's plans had not worked out; possibly the other people wouldn't lie. Jail didn't look too bad to me. If they had color television, I thought I'd stay.

"Why'd you say you worked there?" Maxson suddenly barked. He startled me back to reality. His fist clenched, and he was working his fingers angrily, like he wished he had

them around my neck. I didn't answer.

He picked up a pen. "Okay, so you stole the set. What's your record?"

"I haven't a record."

"How many arrests?"

"I never have—"

He threw down his pen. I lost all interest in jail when he leaned forward with an ugly expression. "I'll advise you," he snarled. "You're arrested, now! If you're gonna lie—"

His phone rang and he picked it up. "Hold it a minute," he said into the mouthpiece. He held the phone against his chest and scowled at me. "You want to drag this out? Or do you want to make it easy on yourself?"

"Make it easy on myself," I meekly assented.

He liked my answer. "You're smart." He put the phone to his ear. "This is Lieutenant Maxson." I couldn't hear the other voice this time. "Yeah," Maxson acknowledged, "I've got Albert Freckle here. Who're you? What's your connection in this? He what? I just called Marty's." I watched Maxson start flipping his pen. "Nights, huh?" he said. "What about midnight till dawn last Wednesday . . . I see."

He banged the phone down and glared across his desk toward me. His voice went up a

tone. "Were you gonna confess?"

I gathered it was Sam who called. "Uh, no. I just wanted to make it easy on myself."

"You're a nut," he growled. "Why didn't you say you worked nights—that your boss would call?"

"You didn't, uh—"

"Get out of here."

I told Hazel how close it had been. She accelerated her little car angrily. "I called the fool. He'd slept in. He always goofs at the crucial time. Can't trust him."

"I hold the same opinion," I ventured. "I'm still in trouble. The lieutenant is bound to doublecheck with the club. Then what happens?"

"Sam's at the club yet. Everything's okay. Sam does know the angles."

"He got you in trouble once."

"Once? Hah!"

"More than once?"

Hazel thoughtfully lit a cigarette at a signal. "Albert," she said confidentially, letting me replace the lighter, "I met Sam years ago when I was young and starry-eyed. I was infatuated with him, and he had ideas how to go places fast. I'm not excusing myself. I was seventeen and should have known better."

I'm a good listener. I just sat there.

"He's been my boyfriend for eight years, because I don't dare date anyone else. He could send me to jail. He had me blackmail a wealthy man. Set it up so I performed the whole operation, but it backfired. The man called the police.

"Of course, Sam got me away, hid me out, but I'm wanted. Sam has a hold over me."

"I don't like him," I admitted.

"Oh, he treats me all right. I'm like a possession to him. He even has other girlfriends."

"I'd never stand for that."

She laughed. "I do. I encourage him. I'd give anything to be rid of Sam."

"I see," I said seriously. I shouldn't have. It alarmed her. She braked to the curb.

"Albert, I was just talking," she said hurriedly. "Don't get any ideas. Sam can be mean. Whatever you do, don't mention what I said." She started the car again. "Albert, Sam and Marty aren't above killing. There's rumors about them."

"He can keep the color set," I said.

"Oh, now," she said with a pseudo gaiety, "You'll be earning it. It's best you play along, Albert."

She assured me I had nothing to fear. Sam was sure to have Marty miles away. "I'm glad you won't meet *him*. He

may be small, your size, but Marty is vicious. My, it's hot today!" We talked weather until we reached the apartment. I held my hand out for her key, and after I unlocked her door, I said, "You're sweet." I stood there stupefied by her nearness, her perfume and femininity, as her eyes searched mine. It was the first time I had given her the least inclination I wildly worshipped her. I fled to my own place.

In my room I cringed and pounded a hand to my forehead. To think I had said that to Hazel! My hands were still trembling when she walked in from the balcony.

"Albert, you forgot to return my key," she said.

I gave it to her and ran for the refrigerator. "Would you like a beer?" I asked, jerking the door open. I didn't have any. I was elated. I could run to the store and avoid facing her.

"No, thank you." She came up and took my arm. I felt dizzy. "Albert, tell me about yourself."

An aunt raised me. She died when I was twelve, and I was on my own. I told her about selling papers; how other kids pushed me off my corner.

"Then you started stealing?"

"Little things that people wouldn't raise a fuss about. I was hungry most of the time,

or I'd probably be bigger. I saved my money—"

"What for?"

"You'll laugh."

"No, I won't." She sounded sincere. I didn't look at her.

"I lived on hamburgers," I said. "I never got enough of them. I thought the greatest thing in the world would be to own a hamburger stand."

"No fooling?" she said. "You know, I always wanted my own cafe. I was a waitress when Sam—"

"When Sam what?" Sam asked. He came in from the balcony.

"When you spirited me away," Hazel mimicked in a falsetto voice. Sam's sudden appearance hadn't startled her.

Sam sat down and forcibly pulled Hazel onto his lap. He smirked at me. "Got off clean, huh, Shorty? I told you."

Hazel struggled out of his grasp and stood up. She avoided Sam's eyes, which perceptibly narrowed in surprise. He looked at me. "It's set for Sunday night," he said. "You be here. I'll come here at midnight with Marty's clothes. Then we'll go down and take care of things. It's simple."

"You're sure?" Hazel questioned.

"Definitely! It's a smarter plan than I knew." He laughed.

By Sunday my apprehension

had grown, and I was ready to run. Hazel knew it. She wouldn't let me out of her sight. She had me over to dinner, and we played cards until Sam arrived. It was after midnight, and he had a large bag of clothes with him.

"Here, put these on," he ordered, grabbing my arm. He roughly reached for my belt as though to undress me right there in front of Hazel.

"Just a moment," I admonished him angrily.

Sam removed a small cigar from his mouth with a nasty laugh. I grabbed the clothes and hurried out before Hazel saw me blush. "Hurry up," he called after me.

It was an expensive jet black suit, and fit nicely except that the cuffs hung at my shoes. Sam had brought a whole outfit, shirt, tie, clasp, even black shoes, and I got a surprise there. The shoes had *three-inch* heels. They made the pants fit.

I looked in my mirror, amazed. There I was, a tall five-foot-seven. I knew, if I never did anything else in my life, I had to get shoes like them. There was also a dark hat with a jaunty curved brim and a green feather in the band. Wrapped in a separate bag was a wristwatch and a ring, and even a wallet with Marty Cutter's initials. It contained his driver's

license and laminated identifications, plus fifty dollars in bills.

The ring looked like a genuine ruby. I slipped it and the watch on, dubiously. Sam hadn't said I might have to identify myself. I knew I was in for an ordeal, and hoped I had a nimble enough wit to carry it off.

There was one compensation; Hazel would see me dressed up. I set the hat to my advantage and hurried back to show her. The honest admiration in her eyes thrilled me.

"Albert, you're positively handsome!" she exclaimed.

She stood up to inspect me as Sam broke out laughing. Our eye levels had changed. I beamed *down* on Hazel.

Sam stopped laughing. "Leave the fifty bucks in the wallet," he warned. He got up suddenly when Hazel started adjusting my tie. I started to blush, then flushed deep red when Sam spun Hazel away and forced her to kiss him. She barely tolerated it.

Sam looked impatiently at his watch. "Let's go," he said. As Hazel wished us luck, Sam advised, "This won't take luck."

Outside Sam guided me to his car. "We'll use mine," he said. "I don't trust your wreck."

"What about the TV?" I asked.

"It'll fit in my trunk. Come on!" It was an order.

We rode in silence until I asked, "Will I have to talk to the men?"

"Huh? Oh! No."

"Then why do I have all your uncle's things?"

"For in case. Look, shorty, I'll do the talking. Just sit there and stop yapping."

The club was dark. Sam parked in back, where I was alarmed to see a late model sedan. "It's Marty's," Sam explained as he used his key on the rear kitchen door. "It's here when he uses his sports job."

Night-lights on the stoves guided us through the kitchen. Sam snapped on a single light to see our way across the dance floor, but the bulb was no match for the darkness in the vast room. It was eerie to follow him across the floor.

I had difficulty keeping up. I wasn't used to the shoes. I seemed to be falling forward and had to arch my back to maintain balance. Climbing the office stairs was worse, but I floundered to the office door that Sam opened. He switched on the light.

"TV's over in the corner," he said, and shoved me impatiently.

I barely avoided falling. The television was nice, a twenty-five inch rectangular. Then

suddenly someone chuckled.

"Perfect!" a pitched voice said from the left.

I whirled. Sam didn't have to tell me the man coming from the private bath in the office was his uncle. He had on a black suit just like the one I was wearing. More appalling, there was a revolver balanced in his hand, pointed directly at me.

"I told you," Sam said, as he leaned back against the closed door, which apparently was the only way in or out. "Same size and all. Look how your suit fits. Burned to a crisp, who's gonna know it ain't you?"

I stood frozen. Even without a gun, Marty wasn't pleasant to look at. His face was creased with hate lines, and he had beady eyes that appraised me with baleful promise.

"You're certain no one will look for him?"

"No one—except the police, who will think he took a powder. The fry cook's gonna say he's the Albert Freckle who works for us. That part's taken care of."

Marty rubbed a finger across his thin lips. I guessed him to be in his early forties. "There're a few details," he said.

"Right. Like the five thousand."

"When we collect the insurance."

"You said in advance."

Marty scowled. "What's with you? My life insurance will be paid to you."

"I'll need money till we collect," Sam whined.

"All right," Marty snarled. He slowly walked toward me, circled me, and then strutted importantly to his desk. "It should work," he said, sitting down, "only you missed a detail."

"What?" Sam protested. "He's a two-bit thief. He won't be missed. Hazel checked him out."

That wilted me. Where I had been on edge to make a run for it, I gave up. I stared at the floor as Marty's high voice cackled with glee.

"You forgot to pull his teeth," Marty announced.

"Huh?" Sam grunted.

"His teeth, you fool," Marty snapped. "If I didn't check the details, you'd get us hanged. Do you think an insurance company would pay double indemnity on an accident without checking the corpse? He can't have a tooth in his head. My dentures will have to be found in his mouth."

"I thought of the rest of it—"

"Big deal." Marty spit. "Get some pliers—a hammer, too. Knock him out so he won't scream his head off."

I saved them the trouble. I just reached up and pulled out

my false teeth. Without a word I put them on Marty's desk. I didn't relish the thought of having his dentures in my mouth, but I was far sicker knowing Hazel had helped plot my murder.

They both stared at my teeth in surprise. Marty chuckled, then threw his miserable little head back and roared along with Sam's vulgar guffaws.

Marty removed his own dentures from his mouth and set them to the left of mine on his desk, then gave me a toothless grin as he pulled another set of teeth from his drawer and stuck them in his mouth.

"I'll get along with my old ones," he said. "It's bound to work. My dentist will identify those plates when they're found in your mouth."

I looked at them. I could see his saliva still wet and glistening in the light.

"Want to try them on?" he asked.

I stepped back and shook my head, but Sam jumped forward and gripped my arm. "You're gonna," he threatened.

"No, wait!" Marty said. "He'll break them. Wait till you knock him out, where we wreck the car."

Then the office door opened. It was Hazel.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Marty demanded.

Hazel answered as she closed the door. "I figured something was wrong when Sam didn't let Albert bring his car."

"Beat it," Marty snarled. He turned on Sam, who had a death grip on me. "Details!" he raved. "You chancing her turning us in?"

"She can't," Sam snarled back. He took Hazel's arm in his other hand. "Look, baby doll, there's a new plan, with big money in it for all of us."

"You lied to me," Hazel said.

"Only so you'd be convincing and get this jerk up here. Besides, Marty has sold this place. We got a bigger deal. Uncle Marty is getting burned up in a car wreck—only it's gonna be Albert. We'll collect double on the insurance: two hundred thousand. How about that?"

Hazel pulled away from him. She looked at the two sets of teeth on the desk.

"Mine and his," Marty said, pointing with the gun. "With my teeth in his mouth it's fool-proof." He watched Hazel carefully, as though he might spring at her if she made the wrong move.

"So you collect. What about me?" she asked.

"You'll get a cut, too," Marty said eagerly.

Sam laughed. "I told ya she'd go along."

Hazel glared at Sam. "Don't

be so sure. Promises are cheap. I want a cash advance."

Sam and Marty exchanged smiles. I couldn't understand Hazel asking for money, but they did. I still couldn't believe she was condoning my murder, but she was.

"Okay," Marty snapped. He spun on his high heels and opened a safe behind a picture. He counted out two piles of bills, twenty-five hundred in each. "You two split five thousand now, and ten times that when you collect. Agreed?"

Hazel tucked her money into her purse. Sam reluctantly pocketed his. "You're giving her half of *my* cut," he complained.

"Right," Marty said. "She's your girl, and she's going to be in this to the end." He left the desk. "Let's go."

I kicked Sam in the shins. He howled, then he hit me. I woke up, tied hand and foot, in his back seat. We were alone. Sam was driving and we were following the blue sedan along an isolated road with a steep ravine on the side.

For the first time I felt fear. Pleading for my life was useless. I had to find something to Sam's advantage to free me.

"You're a sucker," I said.

Sam threatened to cave my skull in for kicking him.

"A sucker," I repeated. "Why

don't you *really* let it be your uncle? Collect it all."

"Shut up," he growled. "Marty has papers with a lawyer that'd fix me if I crossed him. You're the sucker," he taunted, "making a play for Hazel. Thought I didn't know. I wised when Hazel started gettin' standoffish. You stupid jerk, you didn't know when to move in. I decided to cook your goose before Hazel ran off with you. Crazy nut!"

"With me?" I couldn't believe it.

"Simmer down, sucker. She only has one love—money."

I didn't answer. I had witnessed the proof.

Marty parked the sedan with the radiator facing the cliff, parked it right at the edge. Sam parked his car directly behind it. I thought, *So he could shove the sedan over the edge.* Sam untied my legs and forced me to walk to the front car.

Marty had chosen a bend in the road so it might appear a driver had fallen asleep and driven off the cliff. Hazel was in the front seat with Marty, but she wouldn't look at me.

Marty swung his door open and put his feet out, but stayed in the front seat.

"Get the gasoline out of my trunk," he told Sam. "I'll watch him." He shoved a gun in my stomach.

Sam hurried to the back with Marty's keys.

"Douse it good," Marty hollered, "and save some to put on him."

I saw Hazel place her burning cigarette in the car's ash-tray, then get out. "I'll wait in Sam's car," she said.

As Sam finished pouring the gas over the car, I was tempted to warn Marty about the cigarette. I didn't want to die sooner than necessary.

"Open your mouth, Albert," Marty interrupted my thoughts. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out his new set of teeth that had been on his desk.

I clamped down in refusal. Marty grinned and rammed the gun harder into my stomach. Sam came up in back of me with an open can of gasoline.

"Shall I douse him with it?" Sam asked.

"Make him open his mouth first," Marty said evilly.

Sam crushed my neck and forced my mouth open. Marty shoved his teeth in, watching to see if I'd get sick. I didn't. I fitted them in place and stared back at his sinister face. It surprised him.

"Untie his hands and knock him out," Marty ordered.

I wasn't the least queasy about the teeth in my mouth. They were mine, and I was pos-

itive it wasn't a mistake on Marty's part. Hazel had switched them on the desk. She was on my side! Even if I did die, Sam and Marty would be caught. I suddenly realized if Hazel hadn't pretended to go along, they would have killed her, too. I wished I could talk to her.

Sam confidently tugged at the ropes binding my arms behind me. With a gun in my stomach there wasn't much I could do. I was also blocked by the open front door of the car, hemmed in on three sides like a triangle.

The second my hands were free, I knew Sam would knock me out. He made a mistake not knocking me out before he untied me. I ducked, but Sam didn't swing. He didn't swing because all three of us heard Hazel start the car behind us. Sam and Marty looked back to see what she was doing. I didn't. I had a wild hunch I knew what she was up to, though I thought it hopeless.

I grabbed the gas can with the cap off, and pushed Marty back in the seat with it. Gasoline spilled onto his lap. I think Hazel saw me. Marty snarled like an animal and threw the can from him. He again brought his gun to point at me. I ducked. Sam's rock-hard fist slammed my shoulder and

smashed me to the ground. Then there was a crash, followed by a shot.

Hazel had driven Sam's car into the rear of the sedan. The collision caused Marty to fire the gun, and also caused the car to plunge over the cliff. I heard Marty scream as it fell. There was a resounding crash, and the sedan literally exploded in flames. I heard it and saw the flash as I scrambled away, mostly rolling to avoid Sam's feet.

My mad flight had taken me to the edge. My shoulder was paralyzed. I turned to find Sam coming toward me, walking blindly, holding his stomach. Marty's bullet had caught him in the lower chest. He walked right up to me—then he fell. I think he was dead before he reached the flames below.

Hazel helped me to Sam's car. She drove to the club, and we parked it and wiped off our prints. Then we drove home in her car.

The police think Sam murdered his uncle, and that Marty shot him at the last instant. Two weeks have passed, and Hazel and I seem to be in the clear. In fact, we bought a hamburger stand. Business was great the first day, but I'm in trouble again. Hazel just told me.

"I'm patient," she said, "but it's time you kissed me; like tonight, when you take me home."

That's life. I no sooner escape one problem when I'm faced with another. Kiss her tonight? I'm not even accustomed to my high-heeled shoes yet!

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



A real mix of books this month! It was fun making switches from subgenre to subgenre, and I hope I have found at least one candidate for your future reading.

For short story readers—three collections came out in 1991 that may be worth your investigation. Tom Heald edited a collection of “classic” English mysteries in honor of Dame Agatha Christie’s centennial. **A Classic English Crime** (Mysterious Press, \$16.95, 215 pp) contains thirteen pastiches and parodies of Golden Age mystery fiction from authors ranging from “A” (Catherine Aird) to “Y” (Margaret Yorke). Marvelous fun.

Sara Paretsky produced **A Woman’s Eye**, a collection of twenty-one stories by women authors featuring female sleuths (Delacorte, \$19.00, 448 pp). While many of these authors will be known to you, the detectives may not be, and this is a sure way to get acquainted with some new heroines.

Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg, those intrepid anthologists, posed the following situation to a number of authors: “A young woman is found dead on the apartment floor.” Eighteen authors participated, some heading off in rather unusual directions, and created **Invitation to Murder** (Dark Harvest, \$21.95, 292 pp). In this collection, you will meet a variety of authors, some new to you, some not usually known as mystery writers. It is fascinating how diverse stories can be that are based on that one simple sentence.

Now to paperback originals. M. D. Lake brings back Peggy O’Neill in **Poisoned Ivy** (Avon, \$3.99, 256 pp). Jeremiah Strauss is the most disliked dean in the graduate school at “The Univer-

sity," but somehow he has managed to get himself awarded an honor for his scholarship and an endowed chair. When an outspoken coed dies after eating Strauss's prop (a poisoned apple) at his honors dinner, Peggy O'Neill, campus cop, begins to investigate. Not many campus cops get to be heroes (or heroines), in real life or in literature, so this is a fun departure.

Sally Gunning is still trying to get Peter Bartholomew back together after his break-up with his wife Connie. In **Under Water** (Pocket, \$4.50, 215 pp), Pete and Connie spend a great deal of time avoiding each other while both investigate the death of Bentley Brown, one of Pete's employees at Factotum on the isolated resort island of Nashtoba. A good followup to the first in the series, *Hot Water*.

There is no particular order or pattern to the following—except maybe date of publication. Just a mixed bag of good reading.

Emma Chizzit and the Sacramento Stalker (Walker, \$17.95, 210 pp) is an interesting study in how a "cosy" mystery can handle the brutal crimes of rape and serial murder. Mary Bowen Hall's heroine, Emma Chizzit, proprietor of A-1 Salvage, gets involved in a feminist group when she tries to help out a friend—the group is being threatened by particularly vile phone calls and letters, and members of the group are being assaulted and, in some cases, killed. Emma herself almost falls prey to the rapist known as the Sacramento Stalker (who sounds a lot like the real-life rapist known as "Stinky" who terrorized central California in the eighties). Several story lines converge in a good tense ending.

Jerry Kennealy's Nick Polo is drawn into a classic case of investigating the death of a friend and former partner in **Green with Envy** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 199 pp). Colombian smuggling cartels (who use emeralds rather than cocaine), A.A. meetings, and a dead client all lead Polo through San Francisco's mean streets one more time.

The Dean It Was That Died by Barbara Whitehead (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 207 pp) sends Canon George Grindal of York Minster Cathedral on the detecting trail when a particularly nasty dean is killed by a falling "gargoyle" during the All Souls processional. Grindal suspects that there is more to this death than meets the eye, and he is right—the IRA has found another use for York Minster.

P.C. Doherty's ninth historical mystery, **The Masked Man** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 174 pp) brings us eighteenth century Paris. Ralph

Croft, a typical Doherty rogue who also goes by the names Scaramac and Scaramouche, is an English expatriate now imprisoned in France for various crimes including forgery. He is mysteriously freed by the archivist Maurepas and the coldblooded killer Captain D'Estivet; he is offered a pardon if he can assist them in finding out the true identity of "the Man in the Iron Mask." Naturally, he suspects that he will not live to see the end of this intrigue and spends as much time plotting his escape as detecting.

Another historical novel, with a twist, is **Shadow Queen** by Tony Gibbs (Mysterious, \$17.95, 326 pp). The twist is that the "Shadow Queen" of the title is a modern descendant of Mary, Queen of Scots, one who appears to be in possession of valuable artifacts that prove Mary's complicity in the plot against Elizabeth that got Mary beheaded. She also appears to be possessed by the spirit of the dead queen. The mystery is not particularly mysterious—the suspense is in the chase. Which of the unscrupulous characters will find the papers first, and what will happen to poor possessed Marie?

Denise Danks brings us up to date in the computerized world of Great Britain with **User Deadly** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 212 pp). Georgina Powers is a reporter for a weekly newspaper specializing in the computer business. When Black Monday arrives, around the world computerized trading is named as the culprit. But Georgina has a tip—a tip that has led to murder and assault—that all was not what it seemed in the crash of 1987.

Kate Sedley enters the subgenre of medieval mysteries with **Death and the Chapman** (St. Martin's, \$17.95, 190 pp). In 1471, Roger (the "chapman" or peddler of the title) has just left the novitiate of a Benedictine monastery and taken to the road. He intends to go to London to make his fortune. Along the way he encounters a number of people who have lost loved ones near the Inn of the Crossed Hands in London. He decides to investigate and, in doing so, gets involved with Richard of Gloucester.

Crossover by Judith Eubank (Carroll & Graf, \$18.95, 224 pp) invokes Du Maurier in tone and approach. Meredith Blake has come on a scholarship to Edwards Hall in the West Country to study eighteenth century fiction, but strange apparitions at the Hall cause her to investigate the history of the building and the families that used to live there. A little "crossover" between times periodically puts Meredith in the place of a governess at Edwards Hall in Victorian days, but she must enlist the help of her twentieth century tutor to decide what she should do and how. Very gothic!

Alisa Craig (a.k.a. Charlotte MacLeod) involves Celtic and Druid rites when Madoc and Janet Rhys attend his great-uncle's birthday celebration in Wales. **The Wrong Rite** (Morrow, \$19.00, 284 pp) lets us see more of Madoc's musical family, introduces us to a number of Welsh customs, and lets Madoc investigate a particularly inventive means of murder: the blowing up of a sorceress who was jumping the Beltane fire. All of Craig's wit and skill come to the fore in this, her fifth Madoc and Janet Rhys mystery.

Not exactly a mystery. Not exactly an art history. Not exactly a psychological drama. And I'm not sure exactly *how* this book ends. But J. P. Smith's novel, **The Discovery of Light** (Viking, \$20.00, 240 pp), will hold your attention. You'll learn a lot about Vermeer and his paintings, and the narrative about the paintings is so skillfully woven into the slightly insane narrative by central character/author David Reid that you begin to question whether he really is telling it "like it is."

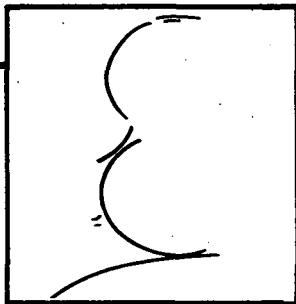
Bill Pronzini's "Nameless" Detective is back in **Quarry** (Dela-corte, \$18.00, 216 pp). Nameless is a little the worse for wear after his last adventure. He is in better shape, however, than his partner, Eberhart, who is about to get married in a big way. Or is he? At any rate, Nameless is doing Eberhart's work as well as his own and is trying to determine what exactly happened to Grady Haas that has made her into such an uncaring victim. When Nameless and his girl Kerry become victims of Grady's past, Nameless really lets loose. Lots of action, as usual, in one of Pronzini's best narratives.

Donna Hill has given us heroine Professor Melvina Tent, an academic sleuth in the mold of Amanda Cross but at the community college level. Urban Fuller College is a little rundown and apparently a whole lot dangerous—the body of Professor Baskin has been found in the trash. Melvina finds herself investigator and potential victim in a chase through the library stacks in **Murder Uptown** (Carroll & Graf, \$18.95, 224 pp).

Dangerous Thoughts by Celia Fremlin (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$15.00, 191 pp) introduces Clare Wakefield, wife of journalist Edwin who has just escaped from terrorist captors. Edwin is thriving in the limelight—he has not been a very successful journalist and this is his big chance—when another captive, Richard Barlow, is set free. Edwin begins to act somewhat strangely; Clare begins to suspect that he was never a captive at all and that he will kill Barlow to keep that fact a secret.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



In *Final Analysis*, Richard Gere stars as a San Francisco psychiatrist who becomes romantically involved with the beautiful sister of one of his patients. He winds up defending her in a case of murder complete with enough plot twists to make a serviceable, if not compelling, thriller.

And, Hitchcock fans, this thriller, also starring Kim Basinger, borrows a lot from *Vertigo*. In that 1958 classic, gorgeously set in San Francisco, Jimmy Stewart is lured into a love affair with Kim Novak so he will wind up a witness to the suicide of a friend's wife.

While Richard Gere's character, Dr. Barr, doesn't suffer from fear of heights, as did Stewart's Scottie Ferguson, *Final Analysis* presents a couple of high-flying scenes from the top of an aging lighthouse that recall *Vertigo's* dizzying bell tower scenes.

Back at the office, Gere is probing the dreams and thoughts of an unsure young lady named Diana (Uma Thurman). She has a recurring dream about flower arrangements and some sort of neurosis about burning down her house. To shed some light on the family dynamic that may have caused her problems, Diana suggests the doctor speak with her sister Heather (Basinger).

Gere, who also acts as the head of forensic psychology at a state hospital and serves as an expert witness in court cases, meets Basinger and does get some insight into her sister. He's told that she was sexually molested by their father, who subsequently died in a mysterious fire.

Gere and Basinger meet a couple of times more and soon wind up in bed on a stormy San Francisco night.

Basinger is married, but to a husband she has little fondness for. She describes him as "a Greek Orthodox gangster who builds public housing for the poor."

Eric Roberts nearly steals the film as the steely-eyed, hard-as-nails husband who gets knocked off halfway through the story. He's so taut almost anything can set him off, and when he puffs on a cigarette, it seems as if he's about to ignite himself.

The audience witnesses Roberts being murdered, so it's not giving away anything to reveal that Basinger smacks him in the head with a dumbbell, fittingly enough, with a force that sends him to a bloody end.

The question is, how can she get away with the deed? That's where Gere comes in handy.

In a courtroom drama, her defense rests on a disease called "pathological intoxication," which causes a person to do things he wouldn't otherwise do if he hadn't had merely a sip or two of alcohol. Conveniently, the person suffering from this little-studied sickness is unable to remember the episodes of wacky alcohol reaction.

When Basinger is cleared, we expect everyone to live happily ever after. After all, a corrupt and creepy mobster, whom the

Feds had been after, is dead. Basinger is beautiful and single and indebted to Gere.

But one cop remains unconvinced. And one cop is all it takes to unravel this carefully painted picture.

At this point in the plot, the action gets jacked up a couple of gears. There are some decent chase scenes—a speedy ambulance ride across the Golden Gate Bridge and a cable car incident come to mind—something no San Francisco-set film should be without.

A late scene at the decrepit lighthouse one rainy night, featuring our hero, heroine, and suspicious cop overlooking the pounding Pacific surf, reveals the trouble with the movie: it is more intellectually hair-raising than actually tense.

The stars, Gere and Basinger, are certainly good to look at. San Francisco is a great setting for any thriller, and the *Vertigo* references are fun. Even the musical score is fulfilling, with lots of crescendos in the right places. But there is something missing here. Although given the quality of many of today's thrillers, this ranks as pretty good, in the final analysis, *Final Analysis* doesn't match *Vertigo* or reach the heights of other Hitchcock classics.

THE STORY THAT WON



The January Mysterious by Andrew Dequasie of Pow-
mentions go to Nancy Rowe
Roberts of Tampa, Kansas;
cerville, Ontario, Canada; D. J. Bart of Albuquerque, New Mexico; Art Cosing of
Fairfax, Virginia; and Norman E. Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin.

Photograph contest was won
nal, Vermont. Honorable
of Columbus, Ohio; Mark K.
Joy Hewitt Mann of Spen-
cerville, Ontario, Canada; D. J. Bart of Albuquerque, New Mexico; Art Cosing of
Fairfax, Virginia; and Norman E. Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin.

Photo by Verna Raghavan

MISSING ANGELS by Andrew Dequasie

Detective Casey was a new man. He studied the framed photo and asked, "Pardon me, sir, but what in hell is that picture?"

"It's a pattern made by sunlight shining through gothic arches onto a dark wall near a dark archway," Captain Star said. "A man was gunned down, and that's the only clue the murderer left behind."

"It was enough to catch the murderer?" Casey asked.

"Yep. I recognized the building. State College. Went down there with the photo and ran into a grad student who simply confessed. The meaning of the picture was so clear to him that he assumed I must also know.

"He was overworked, failing courses, losing sleep; he went psycho. Focused his hatred on Professor Simpson. He decided those sunlight angels in the photo were angels of death. Each day, the sun came in at a slightly different angle, moving the angels to the left. He passed a death sentence on the professor and set the execution for the day the angels would be evenly grouped about the archway at high noon.

"He bought the gun and ammo. He had a tirade of a speech written up. Then it began to rain and rain and rain. He couldn't execute the professor because he had no sunlight to show the proper day."

"Yeah? Then, who got croaked?" Casey asked.

"The weatherman," Captain Star said. "Poor fella, he was on the evening news announcing more rain, when, *bang!* He never knew what hit him or why."

CLASSIFIED

MARKET

AM JUNE/92

ALFRED HITCHCOCK—published 13 times a year. CLASSIFIED AD rate is \$3.05 per word—payable in advance—(\$45.75 minimum). Capitalized words 40¢ per word additional.

A GREAT INCOME OPPORTUNITY

SUPER Fast \$\$\$ Makers! Honestly! Complete Details \$1.00: For4, P.O. Box 8772, Albany, NY 12208.

UNBELIEVABLE! EARN \$4.00 each stuffing envelopes at home. GUARANTEED! Free supplies/postage! USA and Canada! START IMMEDIATELY! Rush \$1.00 for processing fees TODAY! Star Enterprises, 4380 Wellington Rd. South, Box 42023, London, Ontario N6E 3V1 CANADA.

ADDITIONAL INCOME

GET PAID FOR READING BOOKS! \$100 per book. Send name, address to: Calco Publishing (Dept. C-233), 500 South Broad, Meriden, CT 06450.

\$800 Weekly Possible! Working at Home! 7 Different Opportunities. Rush \$1 and self-addressed stamped envelope to: M. Healey, 7 Primus, Boston, MA 02114.

\$1,500 WEEKLY mailing our circulars! ...Guaranteed! Free details! (Enclose) LSASE: SMS, Dept. IO-A1, Box 1960, Cordova, TN 38018-1960.

SHOPPERS! Clericals! Good Home Income working with us. Consumer Services Publications, D8, Springfield, NJ 07081. (Enclose envelope).

TRY US! BUSINESS FACTS \$5.00 bill, SASE: LUCY'S COMPANY, 7824 Halprin Dr., Suite B-1, Norfolk, VA 23518.

AUTHORS' SERVICES

HOW TO PUBLISH YOUR BOOK

Join our successful authors in a complete and reliable publishing program: publicity, advertising, handsome books. Speedy, efficient service. Send for FREE manuscript report & copy of *Publish Your Book*.

CARLTON PRESS Dept SMF
11 West 32 St., New York, 10001

AUTHORS' SERVICES—Cont'd

LOOKING for a publisher? Learn how you can have your book published, promoted, distributed. Send for free booklet. HP-5, Vantage Press, 516 W. 34th St., New York, NY 10001.

*Prepare Your Book
For The Publisher*
THE BOOK DOCTOR
F. Jalet-Miller, M.F.A., Editor
Revising, Rewriting, Etc.
Tel.: 718-896-1719
63-02 Dieterle Crescent
Rego Park, N.Y. 11374

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265-0133.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free Catalogue! New and Recycled Detective Fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232.

FREE Catalogue of used & collectable detective fiction. Dunn & Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, Maine 04609.

IT'S NO MYSTERY! Using Zip Codes in your ad assures more responses! AND, when replying to an ad, make sure your request is properly addressed.

FREE Catalog. Used hardbound and paperback mystery fiction. Books West, Box 417760, Sacramento, CA 95841.

BOOKS BY MODEM. Over 150,000 titles. Earn FREE books! Existing on-line conferences or start your own. Book Stacks Unlimited, Modem-216-861-0469, 3/12/24/9600, 8/N/1.

FREE LIST - Mystery, Science Fiction, Horror. Hardcover and Vintage paperbacks. Ed McDonald's Mostly Mystery, 111 Boston Ave., Stratford, Connecticut 06497.

PLACE

CLASSIFIED

AM JUNE/92

To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Director, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10168-0035.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing Mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start Immediately! Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-MDC, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-0015.

STAY HOME! MAKE MONEY ADDRESSING ENVELOPES. VALUABLE GENUINE OFFER. 20¢. Write Lindco, 3636-DA Peterson Ave., Chicago, IL 60659.

EARN \$50.00/day while shopping! Plus weekly income! Consumer Services, D8, Springfield, NJ 07081. (Enclose envelope).

\$1,500 WEEKLY mailing our circulars! ...Guaranteed! Free details! (Enclose) LSASE: SMS, Dept. IO-A2, Box 1960, Cordova, TN 38018-1960.

EDUCATION & INSTRUCTION

WITCHCRAFT Occult Miracle Power Secrets Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, Newbern, NC 28563.

MONEY FOR COLLEGE! Guaranteed scholarship, college search, services available. Send \$ASE to: Planner, P.O. Box 584, Princeton, NJ 08542.

FINANCIAL

FREE CASH! ...Guaranteed! Never Repay! Millions Available! Free details! (Enclose) LSASE: SMS, Dept. IO-B1, Box 1960, Cordova, TN 38018-1960.

HELP WANTED

\$1,000 WEEKLY assembling products! Guaranteed! Free details! (Enclose) LSASE: SMS, Dept. IO-D, Box 1960, Cordova, TN 38018-1960.

HELP WANTED—Cont'd

MYSTERY Writers With Engineering Backgrounds: I'm looking for new manuscripts. Call Wendy Nelson, Acquisitions Editor, 800-426-1178, ext. 18.

INVENTIONS WANTED

INVENTORS! Your first step is important. For **FREE** advice, call **ADVANCED PATENT SERVICES**, Washington, DC. 1-800-458-0352.

FREE kit for inventors! Call **The Concept Network**. *Patenting *Research *Marketing. 1-800-835-2246 Ext. 197.

JEWELRY

CLOSEOUT JEWELRY. 55¢ Dozen. 50¢ gets catalog. **ROUSSELS**, 107-910 Dow, Arlington, MA 02174-7199.

EXACT REPRODUCTION ROLEX watch. World's most honored. Only \$39.95. Buy two \$79.90 third one absolutely Free. \$3.95 postage and handling. Supply Limited. Order immediately! **World Wide Enterprises**, Box 32815-EQH, Detroit, Michigan 48232.

LOANS BY MAIL

FREE CASH! ...Guaranteed! Never Repay! Millions Available! Free details! (Enclose) LSASE: SMS, Dept. IO-B2, Box 1960, Cordova, TN 38018-1960.

MAILING LISTS

ACTIVE NEW OPPORTUNIST NAMES! **GUARANTEED! FAST DELIVERY! MIXED STATES!** 200/\$12; 500/\$18; 1000/\$28. Dealer's Co-Op, Box 526-I, Griffith, IN 46319. 1-800-992-9405.

**YOU'LL MAKE
MONEY**

**SAVE MONEY TOO—
BY READING and ANSWERING
THESE CLASSIFIED ADS**

Classified Continued

AM JUNE/92

MAILORDER OPPORTUNITIES

MAKE MONEY Working at home. Selling information by mail. Free details! Rush self-addressed stamped envelope: J.B. Terlato, 59 Bay 29th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11214.

MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing mail! Free Supplies, Postage! Bonuses! Start immediately! Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-DCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027-0015.

HOMEWORKERS needed! Earn \$1,000's monthly in our mailing program. Send Sase to: ML Teckert, 2275 Southwest 27th Street, Miami, Florida 33133.

\$1,500 WEEKLY mailing our circulars! ...Guaranteed! Free details! (Enclose) LSASE: SMS, Dept. IO-A3, Box 1960, Cordova, TN 38018-1960.

WAITRESSES/Waiters/Servers, make more money. Success booklet \$10.00: Raspberry Enterprises, Box 292167, Kettering, Ohio 45429.

UNBELIEVABLE! EARN \$4.00 each stuffing envelopes at home. **GUARANTEED!** Free supplies/postage! USA and Canada! **START IMMEDIATELY!** Rush \$1.00 for processing fees **TODAY!** Star Enterprises, 4380 Wellington Rd. South, Box 42023, London, Ontario N6E 3V1 CANADA.

GET PAID FOR READING BOOKS! \$100 per book. Send name, address to: Calco Publishing (Dept. C-233), 500 South Broad, Meriden, CT 06450.

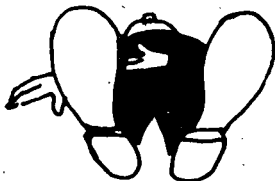
\$800 Weekly Possible! Working at Home! 37 Different Opportunities. Rush \$1 and self-addressed stamped envelope to: M. Healey, 7 Primus, Boston, MA 02114.

SHOPPERS! CLERICALS! Good Home Income working with us. Consumer Services, DB, Springfield, NJ 07081. (Enclose envelope).

SUPER FAST \$\$\$ Makers! Honestly! Details \$1.00: For4, POB 8772, Albany, NY 12208.

MYSTERIES

MURDER, MY LOVELY



Davis Publications and Bogie's Mystery Tours® have entered into a sinister pact that will lead to murder. Participate in the 20th reunion of the Class of '21 and have the crime of your life!

Escape to the luxurious Turnberry Isle Resort in Florida for a Memorial Day Weekend of mystery and mayhem. With Stuart M. Kaminsky, P. M. Carlson, George C. Chesbro, Parnell Hall, & Bill McCay.

Special for our readers: \$359.00 per person (inclusive), double occupancy. May 22-24, 1992.

For hotel reservations, call (800) 327-7028. For information, write to:

BOGIE'S MYSTERY TOURS®
328 WEST 86 STREET, SUITE 4A
NEW YORK, NY 10024
Or call: (212) 362-7569

OF INTEREST TO ALL

HOVERBOARDS like seen in **BACK TO THE FUTURE** now possible from new magnetic technology! Float over almost any surface! Brochure \$5. Educaid Research, 250 Nelson Street, Fall River, MA 02721.

**YOU'LL MAKE
MONEY**

**SAVE MONEY TOO—
BY READING and ANSWERING
THESE CLASSIFIED ADS**

Classified Continued

AH JUNE/92

PERSONAL

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Refined, sincere people. 18-80. Identity, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948. (415) 897-2742.

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS SEEK FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE. American — Mexican — Philippine—European. Photo selection FREE! Latins, Box 1716-DD, Chula Vista, CA 91912.

GOOD SINGLES with Christian values!! Local/Nationwide introductions! FREE magazine! Rush age, interest. Amber, Box 232, Deer Park, NY 11729.

RUSSIA—SCANDINAVIA—POLAND, etc: Worldwide correspondence between sincere professionals (since 1980), SCANNA, POB 4-AH, Pittsford, NY 14534. (716) 586-3170.

PEARLS Of The Orient Want To Write You. Details, Photos FREE, VIDEOS AVAILABLE. (#1 in Service Since 1979.) PAL, Blanca, CO 81123-0051. (719) 379-3228.

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance & marriage with American ladies & gentlemen! ALL ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE INTRODUCTION AGENCY, (Dept. D/P), 2nd Floor, Mill Lane House, Mill Lane, Margate, Kent, ENGLAND. TEL: 01144-843-290735.

PERSONAL—Cont'd

AFRICANS, ASIANS, AUSTRALIANS, EUROPEANS, PACIFIC ISLANDERS, SOUTH AMERICANS seeking friendship, correspondence with you! Full catalogue: \$20. Info: \$1. OK LETTERS INTERNATIONAL, Box 4321-xe, Huntington Beach, CA 92605.

RECIPES

8 RECIPES: Breads-Candies-Potatoes-Casseroles-BBQ Pork. Send long SASE, \$3.00: P.O. Box 2238, Rosamond, CA 93560.

TRIED AND TRUE. A Collection of my best recipes. Send Sase and \$2.00 to: Recipes, Box 33, Hamel, Quebec G0M 1E0.

SONGWRITERS

\$1,200.00 CASH PRIZE. Poems Wanted For New Songs - Recordings - Publishing. Broadway Music Promotions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 34278.

TAPES & CASSETTES

OLDTIME radio programs. Mysteries, adventure, suspense, science fiction, comedies. Classic tapes. Free catalogue. Carl D. Froelich, Heritage Farm, New Freedom, Pennsylvania 17349.

CRIME is rising. . .Don't be victimized! Videotape teaches handgun/personal safety. could SAVE YOUR LIFE! \$14.95: Park Avenue Productions, 413 Park Avenue, Birmingham, Alabama 35226.

For Greater Savings...Results...and Profits...

PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR SPECIAL COMBINATIONS:

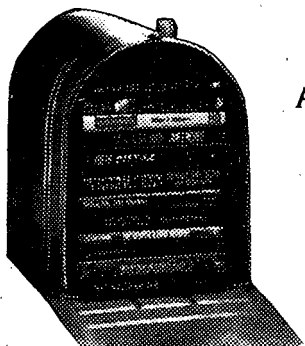
Combo #1, Combo #2, or Combo #3.

Each combination is designed to give your ad the largest audience available.

Each combination offers you a Special Discount Rate.

For further information write to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager,
Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

12 BEST-SELLING MYSTERIES JUST \$1



A \$198.40 VALUE IN ORIGINAL PUBLISHERS' EDITIONS

That's right! We'd like you to enjoy \$198.40 worth of great new mystery and suspense novels, as your introduction to The Detective Book Club ... *for over 45 years, the unsurpassed value leader in mystery fiction.*

All 12 intriguing stories will be delivered to you in 4 specially-designed, easy-to-read triple volumes, available exclusively from The Detective Book Club for only \$1 plus shipping.

TOP QUALITY SELECTIONS AT UNBEATABLE PRICES

As a member you'll forget daily cares as you solve baffling murder cases, suspenseful whodunits, tense courtroom conflicts and more, all featuring the challenging plots and gripping action that are the hallmarks of today's most-read mystery masters like Dick Francis, Marian Babson, Michael Underwood plus many others ... chosen for Club members by our expert editors from among the more-than-400 mysteries published each year.

Best of all, each monthly Club selection (described in advance) is offered to you at *unequalled savings*. As a member, you're guaranteed 60% ... and often 70%, 80% or more ... off the original publishers' prices. Each selection includes three, newly-published novels in one handsome hardbound triple-volume edition for only \$13.95. *That's just \$4.65 per full-length mystery!*

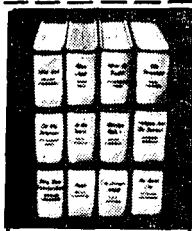
NO RISK, NO OBLIGATION

When you become a member of The Detective Book Club, there is *no minimum number of books you must buy. You may reject any book before or after you receive it.* You may cancel your membership at any time, with no obligation. It's that simple.

SEND NO MONEY NOW

Simply fill out the coupon on this page and return it to The Detective Book Club, P.O. Box 404 Roslyn, N.Y. 11576.

Or call toll free: 1-800 4 MURDER (9AM-4PM EST)



Yes, please enroll me as a member and send me my 4 triple-volumes shown here containing these 12 mysteries. I enclose no money now. I may examine my books for 10 days, then I will either accept all 4 volumes for only \$1 plus shipping, or return them and owe nothing.

As a member, I will receive free the Club's Preview describing my next selections. I will always have at least 30 days to reject any selection by returning the form provided. I may return any book within thirty days and owe nothing. For each triple-volume I keep, I will send you just \$13.95 plus shipping. I understand there are no minimum number of books I must buy and I may cancel my membership at any time.

Mr./Mrs./Ms. _____

92-GS
D32M1

Street _____

PUBLISHED BY
WALTER J. BLACK, INC.

City _____

State _____

Zip _____



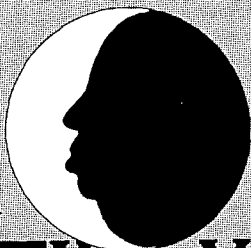
THE DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB

P.O. Box 404, Roslyn, N.Y. 11576-0404

Since 1942, the best way to get more mystery for your money.

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Offer slightly different in Canada.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



FULFILL YOUR NIGHTMARES

Enjoy chilling tales
of mystery and suspense.
Sometimes humorous, sometimes
nightmarish. But always an
intriguing puzzle.



AND SAVE 25%

Receive 18 issues of **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**
for only \$28.97--save 25% off the basic price.

Receive 12 issues of **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**
for only \$19.97--save 22% off the basic price.

CALL OUR TOLL FREE NUMBER

1-800-333-3311

OR

Mail to: Alfred Hitchcock, P.O. Box 7055, Red Oak, IA 51591

Please allow 5 to 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. Outside U.S. & Possessions, 12
for \$27.97, 18 for \$39.97.

All foreign orders must be paid in advance in U.S. currency. Canadian order includes GST.

We publish two double issues, in June and Mid-December. Each double issue counts as two
towards your subscription.

HFST-1

GET AWAY WITH MURDER ... FOR ONLY \$1.



STRAIGHT
by Dick Francis
Pub. List \$18.95



TOURISTS ARE FOR TRAPPING
by Marian Babson
Pub. List \$14.95



ROSA'S DILEMMA
by Michael Underwood
Pub. List \$15.95



ANYTHING FOR A QUIET LIFE
by Michael Gilbert
Pub. List \$17.95



BABYLON SOUTH
by Jon Cleary
Pub. List \$19.95



ANGEL OF DEATH
by P.C. Doherty
Pub. List \$14.95



PATTERN FOR TERROR
by Hugh Pentecost
Pub. List \$15.95



DIAMOND IN THE BUFF
by Susan Dunlap
Pub. List \$14.95



DEFICIT ENDING
by Lee Martin
Pub. List \$15.95



A DEATH FOR A DOUBLE
by E.X. Giroux
Pub. List \$15.95



BROKEN CONSORT
by James Gollin
Pub. List \$15.95



THE MONEY TRAIL
by William Jovanovich
Pub. List \$16.95

RECEIVE 12 MYSTERIES FOR JUST \$1.

For details see last page.

THE DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED